

PROJEKTE

Griet Vermeesch

War, fortified towns and the countryside, Gorinchem and
Doesburg (1570-1680)¹

The process of state building in historiography

The prominent scholar Charles Tilly has pointed out that in 1490 Europe had approximately eighty million inhabitants who lived in more than two hundred states. These polities were highly diverse: there were for instance city-states, duchies, counties, empires, independent towns, republics and monarchies. However, five hundred years later the European population has grown to no less than six hundred million people, who live in no more than 25 to 28 states and the national state is the dominant governing system.² These figures show a profound transformation in the size and the nature of European states, a development that is identified by scholars as the process of state building.

In the theoretical body of work on the process of state building great significance has been attributed to transformations in the military practice of the early modern period. Indeed, any early modern state can be labeled as a 'war machine' since on average more than eighty percent of its budget was spent on organizing defence. A number of tactical and strategic changes were responsible for a dramatic growth of armies on the eve of the early modern period. The invention of fire weapons

¹ The writing of this dissertation is planned between December 2001 and December 2005 at the University of Amsterdam in the project 'War and Society' under supervision of Henk van Nierop. I work closely together with Marjolein 't Hart, who herself undertakes an investigation to wartime experiences in Amsterdam and Westerwolde between 1570 and 1680. Erik Swart does research to the early organisation of the Republican army between 1572 and 1590, Peter de Cauwer examines the siege of Bois le Duc in 1629 while Olaf van Nimwegen explores the organisation of the Republics army between 1590 and 1690. At the end of the project Marjolein 't Hart will write a broad synthesis on war and society in the Republic, based on the results of the above named studies and other recently published literature on the subject matter.

² Charles Tilly, *Coercion, capital and European states AD 990-1992*, Cambridge and Oxford 1990, pp. 42-43.

decreased the importance of knights and increased the weight of foot soldiers on the battlefield. The new type of architectural defence, with the bastion bulwark as the main characteristic - stimulated the growth of armies as well, since it took many troops to besiege a bastioned town.

Both the payment of these troops and the provision of towns with bastions took a lot of financial efforts. In order to finance this new type of war, rulers needed to burden their subjects. Therefore, they organized an administrative body that facilitated the increase of the incidence of taxation. These administrative and fiscal developments were the core of the state building process.³ However, other historians have shifted around causality. They have argued that states who already were in possession of an administrative body and who had a relatively highly taxed population were more successful on the battlefield, since they were the ones who were able to introduce the above-mentioned strategic and tactical adjustments.⁴

In both analyses there are three vital elements that interact: changes in taxation, changes in administration and changes in warfare. The result of fierce interstate competition was the supremacy of the national state, since this governing system was the combined result of the before mentioned vital changes. More powerful states overruled the ones that failed to adapt to the new conditions. Another possible word for this new type of polity is the 'fiscal-military state', a term that expresses the importance of both the martial and the fiscal element.

In the above-described discussions about the causal relations between the identified vital changes, an essential point of view has been neglected. Military and political historians have too easily assumed that rulers could decide autocratically to tax their subjects to the extent they thought necessary. No state in early modern Europe had the repressive or administrative means in order to perpetually impose taxes on their subjects. Nevertheless, the fiscal ceilings of some states - amongst others the Dutch Republic - rose dramatically in the course of the early modern period. Therefore, the question needs to be tackled why subjects allowed

³ Michael Roberts, *Essays in Swedish history*, Minneapolis 1967, pp. 195-225; Geoffrey Parker, *Spain and the Netherlands 1559-1659: ten studies*, London 1979, pp. 86-103.

⁴ Jeremy Black, 'A military revolution? A 1660-1792 perspective', in: Clifford Rogers, *The military revolution debate. Readings on the military transformation of early modern Europe*, Boulder and Oxford 1995, pp. 95-114.

the increasing extraction of their resources by the (central) state.

In understanding the rising taxation in the early modern states, social historians have stressed the importance of the bargaining processes between local and central elites. Jan Glete asserts that if central rulers wished to raise more taxes, they were expected to give something in return, namely protection. Extensive bargaining about the taxes to be raised and the protection to be offered resulted in the development of both taxation and the organization of defence. In this view, the state is seen as a provider of protection in exchange for taxes. In the early modern period some central rulers became the most efficient provider of protection as opposed to others. Central rulers were gradually able to claim a monopoly on violence and taxation. These changes made up the crisis of the medieval feudal state and the rise of the fiscal-military state or the national state.⁵

The social-economic approach to the subject matter allows us to escape from mono-causality and to articulate the interaction between the military and the fiscal factor. Moreover, it allows historians to take issue with elite-centered accounts of Western-European state building and to extend the exploration of this important process beyond the realm of officialdom. We can take this vision even a step further. If historians pay attention to the weight of the so-called tax compliance - the preparedness of subjects to pay the taxes the ruler asked for - then the history of state building in early modern Europe could be written partly from the perspective of social groups without formal political power. This entails a socially complex bottom-up account of early modern state building.

The process of state building in the Dutch Republic

The Dutch Republic is an interesting case of a successful fiscal-military state. Although there was no strongly developed central bureaucracy there was an “enormous incidence of taxation (...) by the end of the seventeenth century the Dutch were widely known as the most heavily taxed people in Europe.”⁶ The high resource extraction happened within a

⁵ Jan Glete, *War and the state in Early Modern Europe. Spain, the Dutch Republic and Sweden as fiscal-military states, 1500-1660*, London and New York 2002.

⁶ Marjolein 't Hart, “The merits of a financial revolution: public finance 1550-1700”, in M. 't Hart, J. Jonker & J. L. Van Zanden (eds.), *A financial history of the Netherlands*, Cambridge 1997, p. 11.

highly decentralised polity. Every province had its own fiscal structure, whereby the tax system of the coastal provinces - that had belonged to the Burgundian patrimony - was more developed than the one in the inland provinces.

Although in the Union of Utrecht (1579) it was stated that a centralised taxation system was to be implemented, till the end of the eighteenth century fund raising proceeded through a decentralised procedure.⁷ At the central level, the Council of State estimated how much funds were needed in order to cover the military expenses of the Republic. This was reported to the States General in a *Staat van Oorlog*, where the respective provinces agreed on paying part of it. They paid a fixed proportion of the sum, the so-called *quota's*. Holland paid more than half, while Gelderland's *quota* was 5 per cent of the total sum. The sums that were agreed upon by the respective provinces were called *consenten*. Long negotiations were inevitable at every voting of the *Staat van Oorlog*. The members of the States General could make no autonomous decisions. They first needed the approval of their Provincial Estates. The Provincial Estates, in turn, consisted of deputies of 18 cities and the nobility (in Holland) or three quarters (in Gelderland⁸). These basic political units ultimately took all sovereign decisions (i.e. on war, peace and taxation⁹).

The explicit bargaining between several political levels implied a slow process of decision-making. That is why in traditional Dutch historiography the Republic is considered as a weak state in comparison to strong centralised and bureaucratised states like France or Spain. However, it is conceivable that the extensive negotiating made the Republic successful in a context of interstate competition. The explicit bargaining and negotiating enabled a remarkably intensive resource extraction, especially compared to less 'democratic' neighbouring countries.¹⁰

The efficiency of this polity is reflected in the fact that the "Dutch military strength and successes in war were out of proportion to the size of the Dutch population and even out of proportion to the economic wealth of Dutch society."¹¹ Indeed, compared to other armies in Western Euro-

⁷ Marjolein 't Hart, *The making of a bourgeois state. War, politics and finance during the Dutch revolt*, Manchester and New York 1993, p. 77.

⁸ In Gelderland a quarter consisted of cities and nobles.

⁹ 't Hart, *The making* (note 7), pp. 78-79.

¹⁰ Glete, *War and the State* (note 5), pp. 140-173.

pe, the Dutch Republic had at its disposal a well-paid and hence well-disciplined military force.¹² It appears that Dutch rulers were able to achieve “success in bureaucratising organised violence and encapsulating it within civil society”.¹³

Transformational effects of bargaining

The garrison town is “the point where the civilian and military aspects of life and society come closest to each other”.¹⁴ At the core of my research are the negotiations between the local governments of two garrison towns with political bodies at the level of the Province and the Generality. The negotiations happen in a context of war and concern the organisation of defence. The period 1570-1680 covers the Dutch Revolt (1572-1648) and the *Guerre d’Hollande* (1672-1678). The selected frontier towns, Doesburg and Gorinchem, are both represented in the Provincial Estates of respectively Gelderland and Holland. Their right to participate in the Provincial diets, their right to approve or disapprove of taxes and their right to refuse the quartering of troops reinforces the strong bargaining position of these local governments.

In my thesis I claim that these negotiations had a transformational effect on the core elements of the polity, that is the organisation of taxation, of defence and of administration. This assertion is clarified in figure one. On top of the diagram it is shown how the need for protection stimulates negotiations between political actors of different levels of the polity. Through these negotiations the means to wage war are developed. Taxation rises on the condition that defence is organised in an efficient way, therefore administrative bodies are developed.

¹¹ Glete, *War and the State* (note 5), p. 144.

¹² Marjolein ‘t Hart, ‘the Dutch Republic: the urban impact upon politics’, in: Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds.), *A miracle mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European perspective*, Cambridge 1995, p. 69.

¹³ William Mc. Neill, *The pursuit of power. Technology, armed force, and society since ad. 1000*, Chicago 1982, p. 144.

¹⁴ Knud J. V. Jespersen, ‘Garrison towns. A general view’, in: Thomas Riis, *Garrison towns and society in early modern Europe*, Odense 1993, pp. 9-10.

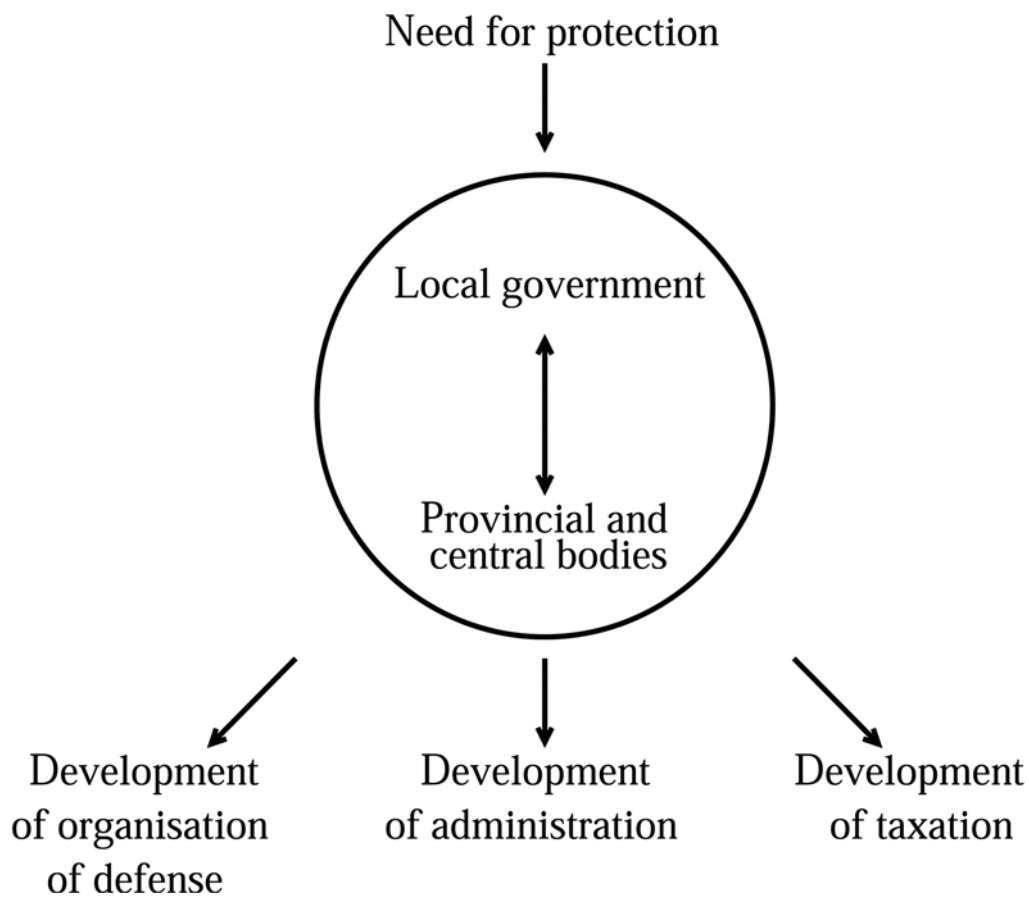


Figure one: Transformational effects of bargaining.

The negotiations concern a variety of issues that are related to the specific problems of a frontier town. Amongst others there are the construction and maintenance of fortifications; the payment and quartering of soldiers; the involvement of burghers in the defence; the provision of armament; the tension between martial law and civil law and the balance of power between central representatives, for instance the military governor, and the local elites.

Illustration of the research: Garrisons in Gorinchem and Doesburg¹⁵

In order to clarify the aims of my research I will expand on one particular issue of bargaining: the quartering of troops. The dense urbanisation of

the Netherlands entailed the dominance of siege warfare. One of the pillars of the defence in the Netherlands was the bestowing of frontier towns with garrisons. In the course of the Dutch Revolt, both Gorinchem and Doesburg hosted between 150 and 600 soldiers. The exploration of archival records has uncovered that the organisation and funding of the boarding of these troops happened in a relatively efficient way. This finding stands in sharp contrast with the experiences of contemporaries of garrison towns in other parts of Europe.

It appears that the quartering of troops was viewed as a cost rather than as a benefit in the Spanish Netherlands, France and England. In England after 1688 the billeting of troops was seen as a sign of tyranny. In the former two territories, many groups, towns and districts bought or were granted exemption from the duty of boarding soldiers. This stands in sharp contrast with the requests of both Doesburg and Gorinchem for additional troops in the years 1650 (in the case of Doesburg) and again in the beginning of the eighteenth century (in the case of both towns). It also stands in contrast with the fact that in Doesburg prominent members of the community hosted military guests.

In the Spanish Netherlands the local office-holders performed an important task concerning the actual quartering. They had to designate the respective soldiers to particular families. In the Dutch Republic the regulations concerning the lodging of troops instructed the reverse: it was only in the case of an exceptionally large military force that the local government was to intervene in the hosting of military men. Since soldiers had to settle their accommodation with civilians personally, they were stimulated not to bother their hosts. The arrangement entailed a strong position of civilians in their contacts with soldiers.

In the Spanish Netherlands burghers had to offer fire, light, vinegar, oil, salt and pepper in exchange for compensations. The *logies* was not paid directly to the host families but passed through the hands of the hosted soldiers. In England under Cromwell food and drink had to be provided in order to receive billet-money. There as well, this money was to be paid

¹⁵ The findings of my research that are briefly presented here, are explained more elaborately in the paper Griet Vermeesch, 'Organizing defence and economic benefits. Garrisons in Gorinchem and Doesburg during the Dutch Revolt', presented at the conference 'L'armée et la ville' in Lille on 7 May 2004.

by the soldiers. When they were not able to pay, their hosts were to receive paper tickets instead. Conversely, in the Dutch Republic foot soldiers had to be offered nothing but 'half a bed' and sheets. From the outset of the Revolt, the hosts received the compensations directly, without depending on the soldier.

In their contacts with soldiers, the bargaining position of civilians was stronger in the Dutch Republic than elsewhere. The evidence suggests that the negotiations between various bodies of decision-making brought about advantageous arrangements concerning the boarding of troops and the good behavior of soldiers. In 1587 the town council of Gorinchem requested the Estates for two English companies to leave in exchange for 'good soldiers'. In the month of March of the same year there was commotion concerning the arrival of a new superintendent, the earl of Hohenlohe: civilians feared to be burdened with additional troops 'against their will'. On 28 March the town government boldly refused the request of Philip of Nassau to accept another company: "at present we do not need additional troops in town, so it is not appropriate to let them in".¹⁶ In July 1586 the warriors of Captain Barcour's company were only to be billeted in burgher houses in Gorinchem on the condition that burghers were to receive *logiesgelden* without providing victuals.

The government of Doesburg often refused companies as well. The company of the English commander Norrits misbehaved in particular, as was written to the count William van de Bergh in 1582. Because of these negative experiences the local government refused to admit an additional company of cavalymen in July 1583.

In addition to the refusal to let in additional troops, the frontier towns could refuse new taxes in order to attain favorable arrangements concerning the quartering of troops. For instance, in 1587 the council of Gorinchem was only prepared to approve of the revised Provincial land and house tax if its inhabitants were allowed a cut on their contribution in exchange for the advanced *logies*.

I would like to stress that the nature of the polity was of particular importance for the friendly arrangements between the armed forces and

¹⁶ The original quote: "(...)also voor desen tijt alsnoch van gheenen noode aan is eenige Compagnien Soldaten in der stad te hebben ende dat oock om Redenen geensins Raedtsaem bevonden wordt deselve inne te laeten".

the civilians. Both Gorinchem and Doesburg were towns with political power and they had the right to refuse troops. Owing to the good bargaining position of towns and burghers the arrangements concerning the quartering of soldiers were quite favorable for the civilians. In collaboration with the population of garrison towns, the Dutch government turned out to be able to “encapsulate this aspect of organized violence into society”.