



David Onnekink, *Reinterpreting the Dutch Forty Years War, 1672-1713* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, VIII and 138 pp., ISBN 978 1 349 95136 9).

David Onnekink's *Reinterpreting the Dutch Forty Years War* is a short book that develops a bold thesis. It provides a direct challenge to the 'realist' interpretation of the three wars between Louis XIV's France and the Dutch Republic of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Realism in International Relations Theory defines conflict as a natural or logical outcome of the relations between states. Wars can be explained by pointing to concrete 'real world' reasons such as geopolitical interests and the military balance of forces. In the case of the Franco-Dutch wars, realist notions are manifest in the widespread assumption that the expansionist ambitions of Louis XIV at some point simply had to clash with Dutch interest in a European balance of power. In line with this interpretation, Dutch historiography generally accepts that the Republic fought defensive wars in 1672-1678, 1688-1697 and 1702-1713, with war the logical and inevitable outcome of a single and unchanging set of French royal policies. The argument is of some relevance to 'identity constructions' behind Dutch foreign policy that continued to exist well beyond the seventeenth century, and that emphasize that Dutch foreign policy is inherently geared towards peace while war is forced upon it from the outside. The most important merit of this book is bringing out this unarticulated, perhaps even unconscious assumption and providing a bold alternative reading of this important episode in the history of European warfare. The main weakness is that Onnekink seems to replace this one-sided realism with an even more one-sided constructivist approach to international relations in which war is considered the outcome of a series of purely subjective discursive strategies. Borrowing heavily from Lene Hansen's post-structuralist reading of modern international relations, Onnekink imagines the Forty Years War primarily as the outcome of a protracted struggle between an (Orangist) Universal Monarchy Discourse and (Republican) Peace and Commerce Discourse, a struggle that divided both the Dutch political elites and their subjects. Given this conceptual perspective, it comes as no surprise that the book mainly consists of dense textual analysis. The aim is to trace the development of the two conflicting discourses in the course of the three Dutch wars with France, in each case concentrating on the period around the outbreak of hostilities when debate was most intense. Onnekink discusses well-known contemporary writers on the foreign policy of the Dutch Republic such as Pieter de la Court and Petrus Valckenier, but also employs

his great knowledge of early-modern political texts to trace the competing visions in official policy documents such as declarations of war, and in popular pamphlets. Perhaps the most controversial argument in the book is Onnekink's insistence that the conflicting attitudes towards France are proof of the existence of two clearly demarcated parties, one revolving around the House of Orange and one revolving around the Amsterdam regents. This of course is a very old argument, but postwar historiography has largely put this idea of sharp party-divisions at rest in favour of a stress on patronage-based local networks and shifting elite-alliances. In a revisionist vein, Onnekink revives the old party-based approach to underline important continuities in the 'identity constructions' employed by the two sides from 1672 to 1713. He insists that the image of an aggressive France that was continuously on the brink of overrunning the Dutch Republic was a seventeenth-century invention, consciously produced by the pro-War party in Dutch politics. He shows that at various points of time there was considerable opposition to such an alarmist image from the Republican side. He therefore concludes that modern historians' willingness to give credence to the anti-French arguments, is proof of them remaining 'trapped in a seventeenth-century foreign policy story of French universal monarchy' (128).

All of this is tantalizing. Unfortunately, Onnekink's narrow focus on intertextuality and discourse forms an obstacle to substantiating his claims, undermining the broader reinterpretation of the Forty Years War that the title and introduction promise. Onnekink stresses continuity in foreign policy discourses, but when discussing the texts on which this claim is based shows such immense contradictions, leaps, twists and turns in the employment of terms and concepts that it becomes hard to judge whether this continuity really was an important feature of the work of the early-modern authors, or only obtains this importance in the process of reconstructing discourses. Furthermore, the choice to limit the investigation to the period leading up to the three wars and exclude political debate during the wars considerably weakens the argument. At various points in the book, Onnekink notes that anti-war arguments quickly evaporated once these wars had started. How credible is the argument of continuous party-divisions, when these were only observable when war was possible, but evaporated as soon as it became a reality? Finally, a more comprehensive reinterpretation of the Forty Years War would have required greater willingness to step outside the texts, and examine how ideas and constructs – possibly substituted by lies and propaganda – matched or clashed with political affiliations, sectional interests, practical military engagements and the actual course and outcomes of wars. This could have included an aspect around which key reinterpretations of standard historiography of European warfare in this period are well under way: the Atlantic and Asian dimensions of intra-European power-struggles, including the influence of colonial projects on how the different European players defined themselves. There is plenty of

material on these non-European dimensions in the sources that Onnekink used, but regrettably they did not make the cut.

The author must have anticipated such criticisms. The concluding chapter therefore contains a number of pre-emptive strikes against readers like myself, who at some point are bound to start wondering whether highly idealized images on the nature of France and the Dutch Republic should not be considered more as propaganda than as the real drivers of events. Onnekink's reply is forceful: 'What this research has shown is that the armies did march precisely because of the discourse that was employed' (128). With this, Onnekink indeed puts forward a radical reinterpretation of the Forty Years War. Yet, while there is much that is of value in his individual case studies, I remain unconvinced that discourse exerted the kind of autonomous power that Onnekink seems to ascribe to it.

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