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The prize of neutrality

Welling, George Maria

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2 Decline after a golden age

2.1 The politics of the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century

The seventeenth century was the period of Dutch hegemony in the Western World and hence has been named the Golden Age. The Dutch commercial empire stretched over all continents and was the envy of its competitors.¹ They found it hard to understand how such a small, though densely populated country, managed to maintain a naval force, which could take on any other. How could this confederacy of provinces find the means to bring such large armies in the field, which made this tiny republic a desired partner in alliances? This country had forced Spain, then one of the leading powers of the world, to give up its claim to sovereignty over the seven provinces that were to form the Dutch Republic. Their government seemed to be of the most inefficient form ever seen in history, a conglomerate of city-states, that all jealously guarded their privileges. Decisions on the central level all had to be ratified by the lower echelons. They had no monarch, but the Princes of Orange had a hereditary right to the highest military position in most provinces of the republic and kept court like kings.

The overall standard of living of the Republic was probably the best of that time. Wages were high, especially in the seaboard provinces of Holland and Zeeland, attracting great numbers of immigrants. Like everywhere else there were rich and poor people, but here the rich seemed to have felt a moral obligation to take care of the needy. They founded orphanages, homes for the elderly, established almshouses, and set on the boards of all sorts of charity-institutions. In such functions the wealthy like to be portrayed by the famous Dutch painters of that time. The affluent built their houses in an austere style on the canals of the cities, some bought country houses to spend their leisure far from the stench and filth that must have been characteristic for all early modern cities.

Though Calvinism (i.e. the Dutch Reformed Church) was the dominant belief in the Republic and other churches were officially discriminated, religious practices of almost all other creeds were tolerated. This attracted dissenters from all over Europe to the Republic and the capital and expertise in commercial affairs that they brought with them, were a stimulus

¹Based on: I. Schöffler, H. van der Wee and J.A. Bornewasser (1978), J. Israel (1995), S. Schama (1977)

for the expanding economic power of Amsterdam. Huguenots, Sephardim and Ashkenazi Jews, Baptists, Quakers, and Mennonites enjoyed the tolerance, which was so hard to find elsewhere in Europe. Roman Catholics were feared as a possible fifth column and had to put up with greater restrictions than others, but there was no real prosecution and Masses were read regularly in conventicles, cleverly disguised as patrician houses along the canals. Maybe even more astonishing for contemporaries was the almost complete freedom of the press in the Netherlands. The Dutch authorities only rarely forbade publications. Many philosophers, political theoreticians, and free-thinkers, that were not allowed to be published in their own countries, were printed by the famous Dutch printing houses and books were one of the export articles.

The basis for their success in world affairs was the wealth that they had gathered by their extraordinary performance in trade. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century a number of cities played their part in the international arena. Hoorn and Enkhuizen were involved in trade on Norway and herring-fisheries, Haarlem was renowned for its bleacheries and breweries, Zaandam for its sawmills and shipyards, Leiden for its woollens, and Gouda for its pipes and cheese. Dordrecht was still a major harbor especially involved in the wine-trade, Rotterdam was gaining in importance, and the ports of Zeeland, like Middelburg, Veere, and Vlissingen, were buzzing with activities connected with all sorts of trade, including the slave trade and privateering. And a number of other towns like Zwolle, Edam, Medemblik, Harlingen, Harderwijk, Franeker, Alkmaar, Arnhem, Groningen, and even smaller places like De Rijp and Vlaardingen, played their part in the international trade. But the wealth and power of Amsterdam overshadowed all the others. This city of 200.000 was the financial and commercial center of the world and the patricians of Amsterdam were the dominant factor in Dutch politics. Either directly or via straw men they had great influence in the government, and controlled both the Dutch East India Company (VOC) as the West India Company (WIC). These companies, of which only the VOC was successful for a long period, had a strange dual nature: a company in the Republic, but a territorial power in the Colonies, building forts in Africa, Asia and the Americas to guard their interests.

Most historians agree that the picture changed dramatically in the eighteenth century. The Dutch were not able to maintain their dominant place in world trade and after a few calamitous wars the Republic became a minor military power in international affairs, although

its financial reserves still made it a much demanded partner in alliances. Even in the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the international trade of Amsterdam had come to an almost complete standstill, Napoleon was still convinced that the kingdom that he had given to his brother Louis, had to be capable to support his war efforts with much greater sums of money than it was prepared to give. Earlier the almost legendary financial reserves of the Republic had also attracted the attention of the American revolutionaries, who were in dire need of loans to sustain their war efforts against the English. Even if the Republic was no longer the great naval power that it once was, and internally had to deal with structural economic problems causing unemployment, poverty, and a rapid decay some of its cities, it still was a power to be reckoned with in the world of finances. And probably it still had a higher standard of living for most of the century than its rivals.

But the mood had changed. It was no longer the self-conscious power, that was proud of its possessions, and that admired its audacious naval heroes, like De Ruyter and Tromp. The memory of glory turned bitter with each new setback and since the 1720's complaints about the state of affairs poured in. All sorts of remedies were suggested, as far reaching as making Amsterdam a free port, but the process of decision had become so complicated that it is a small wonder that any decision was made at all.

Factional strife paralyzed the government. On the one hand the faction of the Prince of Orange supported an increase in expenditure on the military. The prince was the commander-in-chief of the land forces of the Republic and had dynastical ties with the English court and hence did not want to get in the way of the supreme English naval force. His support came mainly from Friesland and the land provinces, of which the latter had found out the hard way how easily the country had been overrun by enemies a number of times. On the other hand the States of Holland, serving the interests of the merchants of Amsterdam, demanded a reconstruction of the navy to protect the colonial possessions and trade-routes from the increasingly arbitrary English. For one faction the English were the natural allies, for the other the natural enemy.

The War of Spanish Succession (1702-1713) was the last war in which the United Provinces played a major military role in an alliance with Britain, Prussia and Austria against France. From a position of power they resumed the vitally important trade with France during the war, in spite of complaints of their allies. But the outcome of the war was highly

unfavorable for the Dutch. They did not regain the slaving *assiento*, the right to be the supplier of slaves to the Spanish empire, which went to the British, who had negotiated a separate agreement with France. They had accepted Philip V as king of Spain in exchange for the *assiento*, Gibraltar, which had been captured with the help of Dutch troops, and Minorca. The Dutch were furious about this master-stroke of English diplomacy, but unable to continue the war-effort were forced to accept the conditions of the Peace of Utrecht in 1713. The dominance of the United Provinces over the Austrian Netherlands was continued, but the new cordial connections between France and England and the rise of Prussia, which had annexed a number of territories on the Dutch eastern border after the death of William III of Orange, locked them in between powerful rivals. The war had left the Republic with such debts that the military intervention in conflicts was no longer a easily taken option. During the war of the Polish Succession (1733-1735) the Republic the reduction of the once large Dutch army was delayed. In the war of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), in which all rivals and allies took part, the Republic remained neutral as long as possible, but her obligations to England and Austria finally drew her into the war.

2.2 Neutrality

The Seven Year's War (1756-1763), for which Austria and Prussia had changed partners, was the first war in which the Dutch were to adapt a policy of neutrality.² The merchants of Amsterdam, jealous of England's ever growing commercial success, saw an opportunity to regain some of the lost ground by trading with all belligerents. The commercial treaty of 1674 with the British, allowed both parties to trade as neutrals in conflicts. The treaty only excepted trading in the necessities of war, like powder and guns, which were declared contraband. However the Dutch interpretation of neutrality did not correspond to the British view. The Dutch, stretching the idea of neutrality to its limits, claimed that free ships carried free cargo. This implied that they had the right to trade with and for all belligerents in all goods. So when the British almost stopped the French West-Indian trade, the Dutch took over on behalf of the French. But not only West-Indian goods, also wood, masts, sails and other were transported to

² A.C. Carter (1971), IX

France in great quantities. Although these goods were not actually "contraband" the English reserved the right to stop ships on the open sea, that carried these goods. The shippers were forced to sell their cargoes to the British crown in English ports for prices that could not bring the profits that sales in France would have brought.

The seizures of Dutch ships on the open sea stimulated an anti-British mood in the Republic. The merchants of Amsterdam, who were making enormous profits in spite of the risks of this trade, demanded that merchants ships would be protected by navy convoys. This however, was out of the question. First of all, the fleet was in such a miserable state, that any action, which might lead to a confrontation would be inadvisable. Secondly, the stadtholder, who was strongly pro-British, and the States General were not willing to risk an open conflict with the British.

Though quite a number of ships were seized, most of the Dutch ships succeeded in evading the British cruisers and safely landed their goods in France, collecting the profits which would revive the port of Amsterdam for a short period. This success obscured the weakness of the Dutch staple-market system and ended the discussions about the need for structural changes that had been going on for a number of years. The staple-market seemed to function as well as a century before and the proposition to convert Amsterdam to a semi-free port lost all attractiveness. The policy of neutrality had been very beneficial for Dutch trade, which reached a high point for this century, which would only be equaled by the period just before the fourth Anglo-Dutch war.³

A number negative aspects of the Dutch position became evident although business had been booming. To uphold a policy of neutrality a strong fleet was needed to protect the merchant marine from seizures and other forms of harassment by belligerent parties. The merchants of Amsterdam claimed that a loss was suffered of about 8 million guilders because of forced sales in Britain.⁴ However, rebuilding the fleet was a task of the boards of the Admiralty, which were deep in debt. The seaboard provinces led by Holland, demanded priority for the restoration of the fleet, but the country provinces and the stadtholder pleaded for a strengthening of the armed forces. William V, stadtholder since 1766, was a strong

³ See W.G. Heeres (1988)

⁴ H.T. Colenbrander (1897-1899), Part 1, 60

supporter of maintaining the alliance with Great Britain and upholding the treaty of 1678. He argued that rebuilding the fleet prior to rebuilding the army could only be interpreted as a hostile act towards Great Britain. The coastal provinces on the other hand, feared that an army build up would only reinforce the position of the stadtholder. The result of this deadlock was that nothing was done at all.

The stubbornness and lack of tact of the stadtholder divided the country into two parties: a coalition of the landed provinces and the stadtholder against the seaboard provinces under the under the direction of Amsterdam.

The problem became more acute in the 1770's when new tensions grew in international affairs. In 1774 the first Continental Congress was held in Philadelphia by delegates of the British colonies in America, who were dissatisfied with the situation. In April 1775 hostilities began between the rebels and Great Britain. The Dutch seaboard provinces saw a new chance for trade at the expense of the British by supplying its the enemies. The Declaration of Independence of July 4 1776, was received with great enthusiasm in Amsterdam. The loss of her American colonies would be a severe blow to the British hegemony and would also be a belated revenge for the loss of New Netherland. The former British colonies had not been allowed to trade directly with third countries. The merchants of Amsterdam expected great opportunities for trade with the United States. In 1778 they concluded a trade-treaty in Aix-la-Chapelle with the Americans, which would come into effect after the hostilities would have stopped. To supply the French and the Americans enormous stores of guns, ammunition, masts, wood, and sails were gathered in Amsterdam. Great sums of money were borrowed to buy even more. Money became scarce in Amsterdam.

The British reacted as they had done during the Seven Years War by seizing Dutch ships and protesting against the overt support for the American rebels. The first ships were seized in 1778 in the West-Indies, where St. Eustatius had been converted to a storehouse for the United States. On November 16, 1776 the Andrew Doria, flying the flag of the rebels, had even received an official salute from the guns at Fort Orange. The Governor of the island, Johannes de Graaff, who had personally ordered to return the salute of the American vessel, brought Anglo-Dutch relations under severe stress. The British demanded redress and De Graaff was revoked from his position. The British navy started to board Dutch ships in the British Channel, in an attempt to stop the flow of goods from the French West-Indies and the United

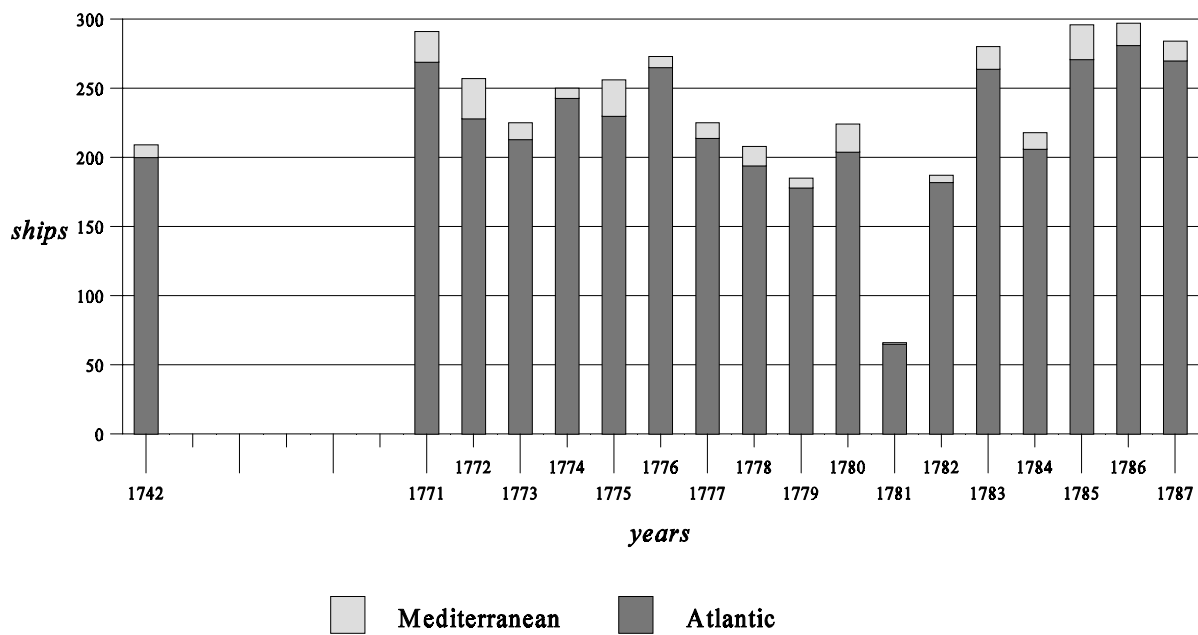


Figure 1 Number of ships arriving in Amsterdam from France from the Atlantic and Mediterranean ports, 1742, 1771-1787. Source: *Paalgeld* portbooks

States. However, Dutch involvement with the rebellious American colonists only grew and would lead to the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war (1780-1784).

To ascertain how effective the British seizures were, I have computed the grand totals of the Dutch trade with France from the portbooks of the levy of the *Paalgeld*, which are represented in figure 1. All ships arriving from the French Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts were summed. Indeed the data show a decrease of ships arriving in 1778 and 1779. The first year of the war with Britain shows a peak, probably caused by ships hurrying to Amsterdam before the actual outbreak of the hostilities. The figures for 1781 and 1782 show the impact of the war on the trade with France. Although peace was only made in 1784, hostilities were few after 1782 and from 1783 the same levels are reached as before the war. On the whole, it is clear that the Mediterranean trade with France was hit much harder than the Atlantic trade, although the absolute figures seem to obscure this a little.

To see the impact on the direct trade with the rebelling American colonies, the number of ships arriving from North-America has been plotted for the same years in figure 2. It is evident from this graph that the limited direct trade with the American colonies that existed before the tensions began to grow stronger, dropped to an almost complete standstill when the hostilities between the Americans and the British began. In 1782 a commercial treaty was

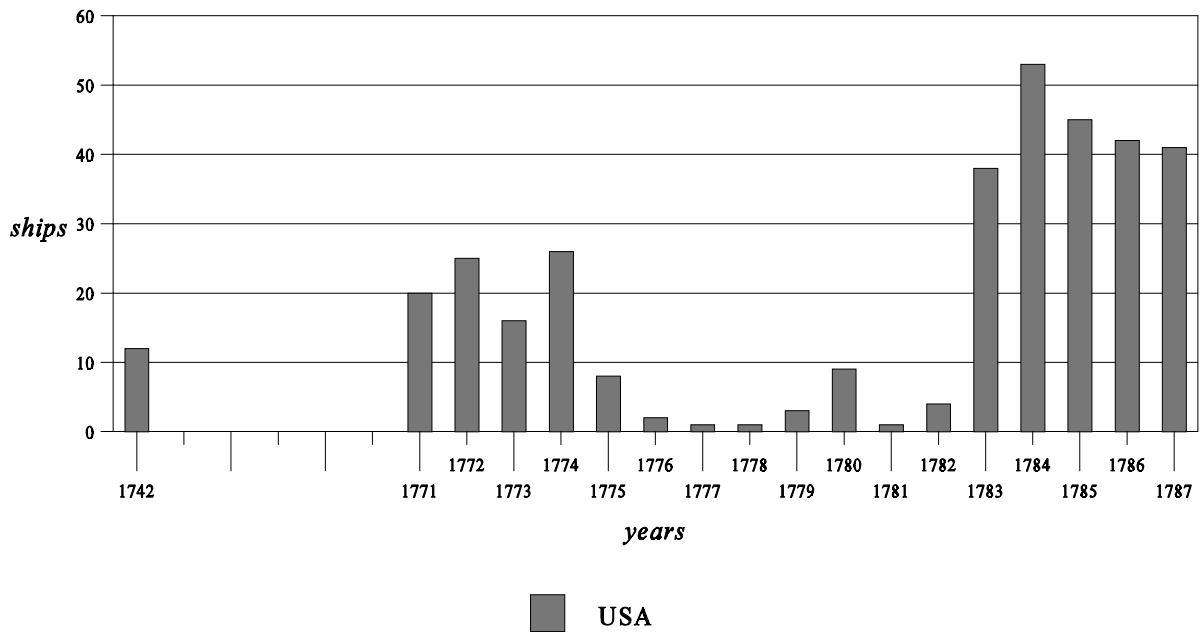


Figure 2 Number of ships arriving in Amsterdam from the USA 1742, 1771-1787. Source: *Paalgeld* portbooks

signed between the Dutch Republic and the United States of America. Quite striking are the numbers of American ships coming into Amsterdam for the years 1783-1784 when the Dutch Republic was still officially at war with Great Britain. But does this prove the effectiveness of the British blockade seizures and later the blockade? Did this cause the complete paralysis of the remnants of Dutch shipping, as Schulte Nordholt prompted Israel?⁵ I shall show later that these war years were very busy years in the port of Amsterdam. Great numbers of small ships were needed to provide the city with almost the same volume of goods as in peace time. From the neutral territories, the *Kleine Oost*, Denmark, and even Norway, all of a sudden came goods which before that time were only imported from France, Spain and Portugal! The profits were so tempting, that the Dutch merchants found ways to continue the risky trade with the Atlantic ports of France, Spain and Portugal, and even with the West-Indies and the American Rebels.

⁵ J. Israel (1995), 1097

2.3 British enemies

The overt mental and moral support for the American rebels after 1776 were the reason for the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784), whose disastrous outcome revealed the weakness of the United Provinces for all to see. Internally the discontent about the poor performance of the Dutch in the war would lead to a revolutionary movement, the Patriot revolt (1781-1787), which foreshadowed some of the aspects of the later revolution in France. The *Patriots*, who saw their great example in the democratic structure that was established in the United States of America after the success of the war of Independence, blamed the decline of the Republic on the old structures and the poor military performance in the war on the incompetence of the commander-in-chief, the stadtholder prince William V of Orange. They demanded radical changes and might have been successful if not for a Prussian intervention in 1787, which drove many patriots out of the country. Some went to Paris to return eight years later with the French revolutionary forces, others like Van der Kemp went to his friends in the United States and settled there.⁶

The events of 1795 illustrate how the Dutch Republic had become a second-rate political power. The French invaded the country and then allowed the Patriots to set up their own Batavian Republic. In view of these inauspicious circumstances and the financial burden the Republic had to bear in the form of having to pay for the occupying French troops and an additional war indemnity, it is astonishing what was accomplished during the period of the Batavian Republic (1795-1806) and even during the Kingdom Holland (1806-1810). After the restoration of the Oranges, now as Kings of the Netherlands, after the three year period of annexation into the French empire, many institutions of the Batavian Republic were transformed to become part of the kernel of modern Dutch political organization. Many of the prominent figures during the French dominance, like Falck and Roëll, served again under William I of Orange, king of the Netherlands.

Though the Low Countries were united for a short period of seventeen years after 1813, the Netherlands were reduced to a political status befitting its geographical dimensions. Most of its colonial empire had been lost: the Dutch West-Indies, Surinam, and the Dutch East

⁶ S. Schama (1977), 131

Indies were all that was left of the network of trading point and strongholds that the United Provinces had built. The Dutch had to adjust to a new role in world politics.

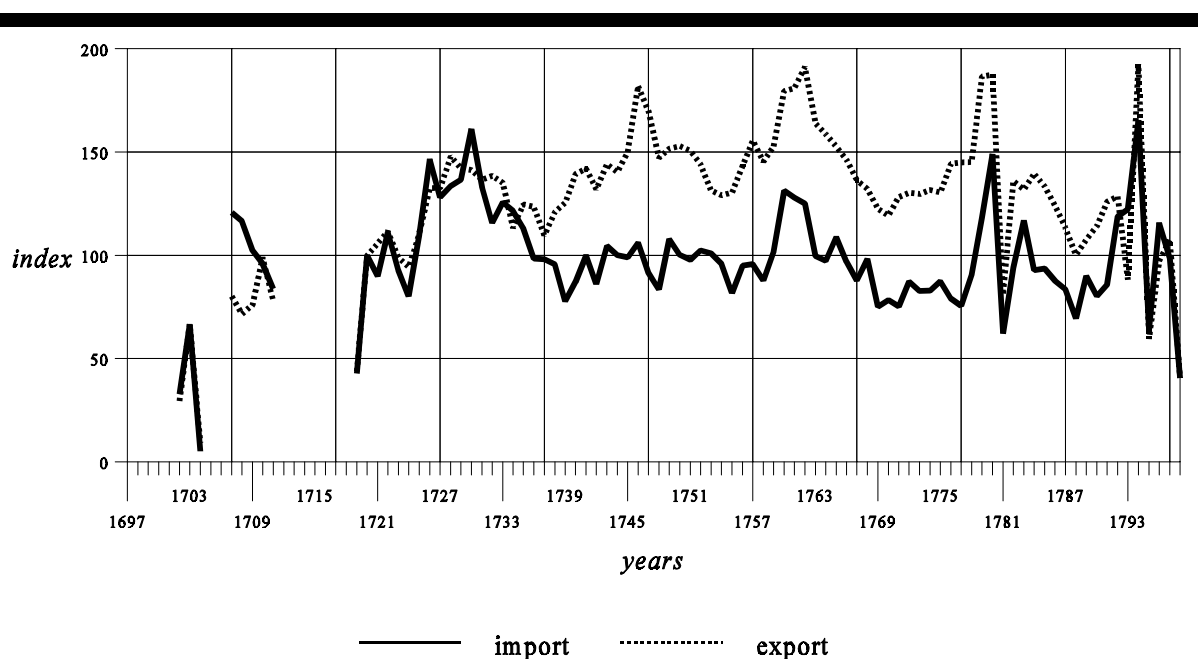


Figure 3 Amsterdam's imports and exports to and from Europe and neighbouring regions, 1697-1798. Index 1720=100. Source: Heeres (1988) table 1.

2.4 Economic development of the Republic in the eighteenth century

Three processes worked together to undermine the leading position of the Republic in the world in the eighteenth century. There was a relative decline, an external contraction of the trade on closer markets, and an internal contraction of trade in fewer centers.⁷

First of all, the competition outshone the Dutch. The technical advantages they once had were erased: the former leaders in trade failed to adapt to changing circumstances. Furthermore, rigorously protective mercantilistic measures by their competitors drove them off their home-markets. Some time in the first quarter of the eighteenth century England, France, and maybe even Hamburg and Oostende became serious rivals and some overtook the Republic. The volume of trade that the Dutch attracted remained more or less stable, but their share in

⁷ J. de Vries (1959)

the total world trade dropped. Since De Vries most modern historians agree that this process of relative decline took place, rejecting the older view of an absolute decline.⁸ However, the most important authors disagree about the periodisation and about the explanation of the process.

In *Dutch Primacy in World Trade 1585-1740* Jonathan Israel pinpoints the year 1740 as the start of the definite decline of the republic. In his later work *The Dutch Republic, its rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* he picks the year 1720 as pivotal year.⁹ The loss of the *rich trades* and structural internal problems were the reasons for this absolute decay. However, none of the time series that will be presented here support this view. Using the same data on which Israel bases this assumption, the revenues of the *Lastgeld*, and taking the value for 1720 as basis for an index, it is evident that neither 1720 nor 1740 qualify as starting points for the decline. Exports only dive under the 1720 value in the 1790's and the imports show an increase until 1730 and then a decline to about the level of 1720, only to drop below that value in the 1770's, recovering again around 1790. (see figure 3) In figure 2 the data for the Revenues of the *Convoyen* and *Licenten* show more or less the same picture.¹⁰ These time series both indicate that the middle period of the eighteenth century cannot be interpreted as a period of absolute decline. To ascertain a relative decline, these figures should be compared with figures for the competition. Johan de Vries discerns the first traces of the relative decline between 1730 and 1750 and assumes that during the second half of the century the process was completed. He assumes a complex of factors as an explanation. The staple market did not function as it did in the previous century. The price-forming mechanism of the staple market, where semi-monopolies tended to keep stable prices, became a negative influence, when rival staple markets began to attract the trade. A flexible price-forming mechanism might have responded to this threat by lowering the prices, but this did not emerge. The

⁸ Of the modern historians only J. Israel (1995) seems to imply an absolute decline.

⁹ J. Israel (1989) and J. Israel (1995)

¹⁰ The "corrected total" is the sum of the Admiralties Van de Maze (Meuse), Amsterdam, West-Friesland and the Noorderkwartier, and Friesland, to which has been added 6,5% of that total value being the average amount of the admiralty of Zeeland for the years data for that admiralty are available.

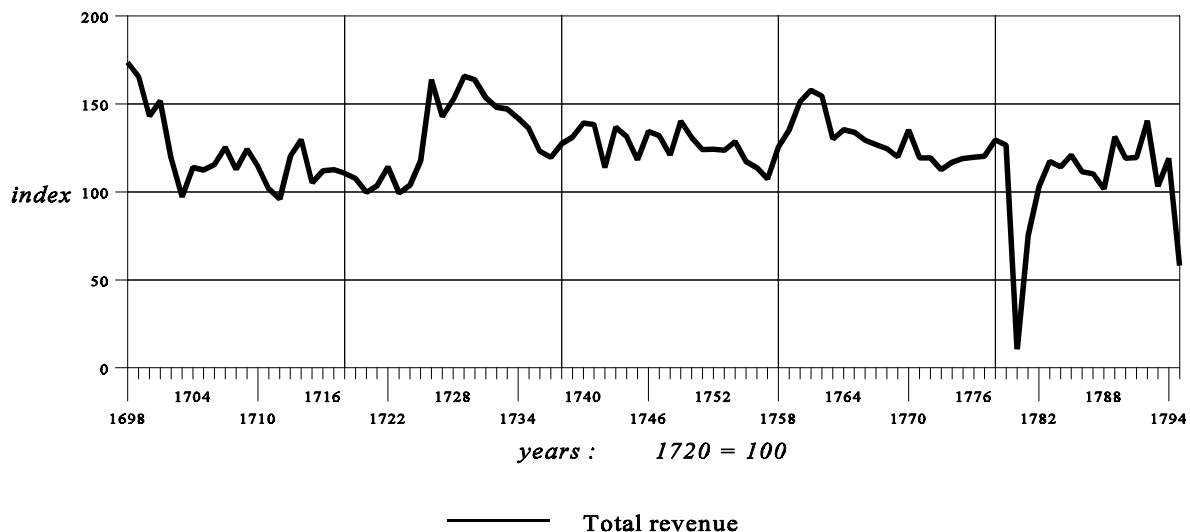


Figure 4 Corrected index of the total Revenues of the *Convoyen* and *Licenten*, 1698-1795. Index 1720=100. Source: De Vries (1959), 159.

merchants persisted in claiming the margins they had always had. This stimulated another cause of the decline of the staple market, the *voorbijlandvaart*:¹¹ merchants avoided the staple market altogether and shipped goods directly from the ports of origin to their final destinations. Johan de Vries mentions the lack of a strong export industry as another factor. Finally, the silting up of the main entries of the harbors of Amsterdam and Rotterdam became a serious impediment to shipping. Still, all these negative factors did not succeed in causing an absolute decline from which there was no recovery during the eighteenth century. It was the complete standstill of trade during the annexation by France from 1810 to 1813 that dealt the final blow, from which there was no recovery.

De Vries and Van der Woude paint a much more complicated picture.¹² Until the 1780's the dimensions of commercial activity remained more or less stable, but English and French activity exceeded that of the Dutch Republic more and more. They avoid the term *decline* as much as possible: they prefer to speak of a restructuring of the Dutch economy and trade. They describe a process of a dynamic adaptation to new circumstances. The emphasis on the Baltic and Mediterranean trade of the Golden Age shifted towards new main points: the colonial

¹¹ The term means: *sailing past the land*. This indicates that ships carrying for example cargoes from the Baltic went straight to France, without unloading the goods on the Amsterdam staple market.

¹² J. de Vries and A. van der Woude (1995)

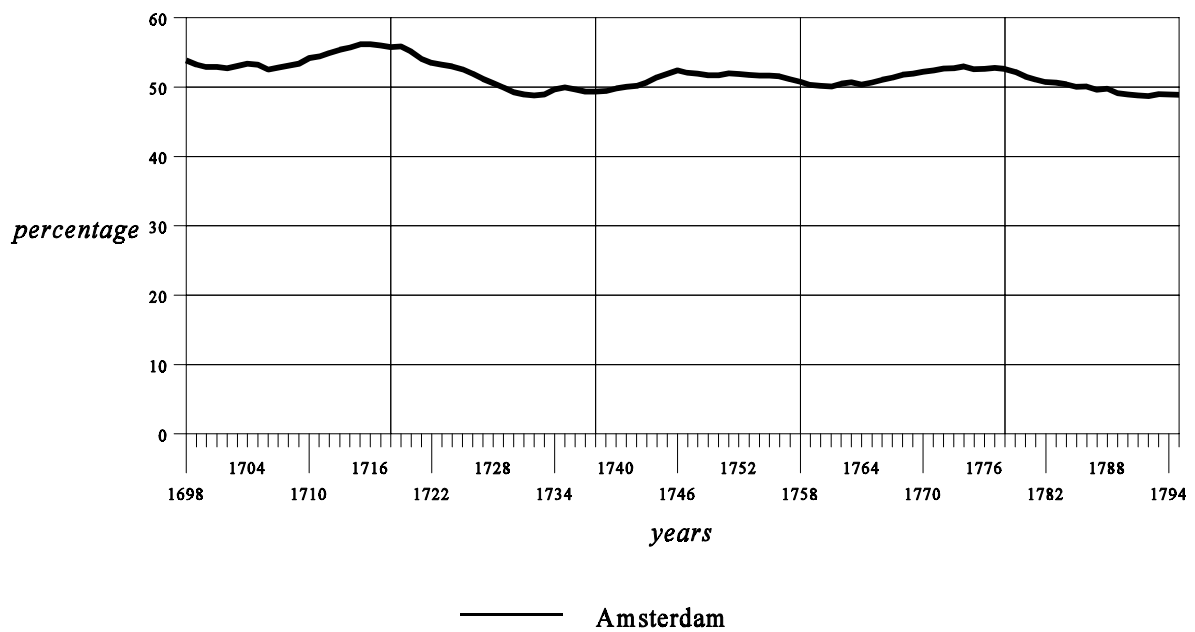


Figure 5 Percentage of Amsterdam's share in the revenue of the *Convoyen en Licenten* in 13 year moving averages, 1698-1795. Source: De Vries (1959)

trade, the Atlantic trade and the trade on the German hinterland. The colonial trade became the new "*moeder negotie*", which stimulated the development of new industries. Re-export of their products replaced the former export based on domestic production. In the Atlantic theater they assume an increased importance of the West Indian trade. This incorrect assumption is based on the data of the revenues of the *Paalgeld*, which Heeres published.¹³ However, Heeres mentioned that one should interpret the term "West Indian" as meaning mainly "American" and I have proven that this is correct.¹⁴

Johan de Vries also explains that the character of the trade changed: the Dutch merchants lost their dominant position in the long-distance trade. Comparing the destinations of ships at the beginning and at the end of the eighteenth century, he notices a decline of destinations in the Mediterranean, the Baltic and Russia, and an increase of nearer destinations

¹³ W.G. Heeres (1982,1)

¹⁴ See: W.G. Heeres (1982,1), 3 and: G.M. Welling (1994), 127-131

like England, Northern Germany and the Austrian Netherlands. He labeled this process *external contraction*.¹⁵

Finally De Vries describes how the number of Dutch ports involved in large scale trade declined and how traffic contracted on Amsterdam and Rotterdam: he calls this process *internal contraction*. For a large part De Vries based his view on the analysis of the revenues of the *Convoyen* and *Licenten*,¹⁶ of which he published the data as an appendix to his study. These long columns of figures for the most important *kantoren*¹⁷ of the five admiralties and the grand totals for all admiralties, who administered this levy, seem to provide a solid foundation for this view, though De Vries admits that the *Convoyen* and *Licenten* are tricky, because we cannot differentiate between imports from exports.

The sheer number of data makes it almost impossible for a human being to discern patterns in the data and one is inclined to recognize a pattern that is suggested by the author.

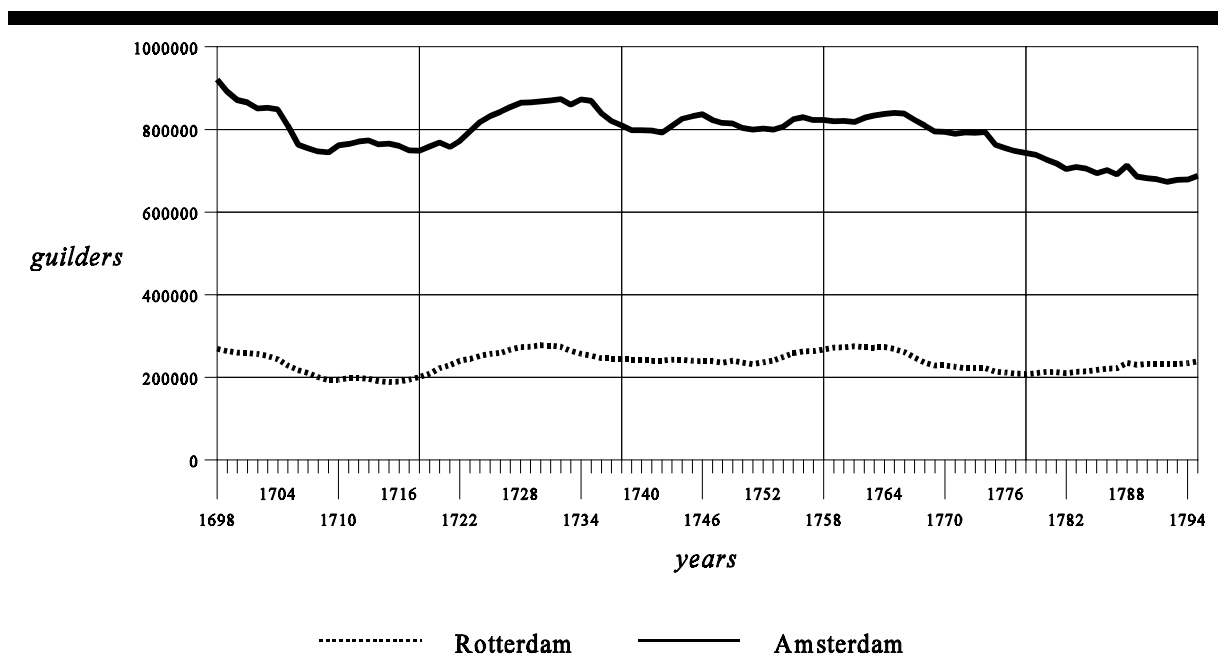


Figure 6 Revenu of the *Convoyen* and *Licenten* of the *kantoren* Amsterdam and Rotterdam in 13 year moving averages, 1698-1795. Source: De Vries (1959)

¹⁵ J. de Vries (1959), 38

¹⁶ For an explanation of the character of this tax, see chapter 3.

¹⁷ *Kantoor* means office.

De Vries did not have the data crunching facilities of modern computers at hand and had to rely on the small number of graphs that he produced and on the impressions he had gathered from other sources for his interpretation of the data. Using the figures that he published as computer input, one can perform further statistical analyses and create graphs. This allows us to refine the picture that De Vries created. First of all, the concentration of the trade on Amsterdam is not as evident as he claims. Figure 6, in which 13-year moving averages are used to exclude incidental fluctuations, shows that Amsterdam's trade dropped slightly over the eighteenth century. Figure 6 shows that Rotterdam was much better able to maintain its share in the total trade: while the figures for Amsterdam show a marked decline, the curve for Rotterdam is rather stable. This suggests that Rotterdam, which was better situated than Amsterdam for the ever more important Atlantic trade and the trade with the German hinterland, held its position better than Amsterdam and may even have gained on Amsterdam, although the revenues of the *Havengeld* in Rotterdam give no indication of this.¹⁸

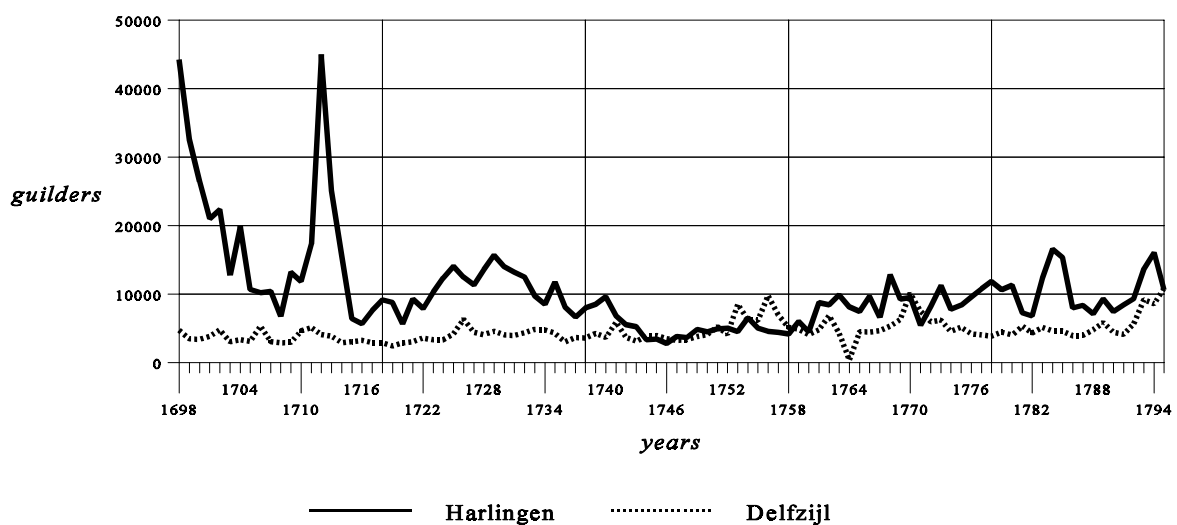


Figure 7 Revenu of the *Convoyen* and *Licenten* for the *kantoren* Harlingen and Delfzijl, 1698-1795. Source: De Vries (1959)

The leading role of Amsterdam however is confirmed by the fact that only at the very end of the eighteenth century does its share of the revenue dip below 50%. The data for the other admiralties, especially for West-Friesland and the Noorderkwartier, show the decline of

¹⁸ J. de Vries (1959), 195

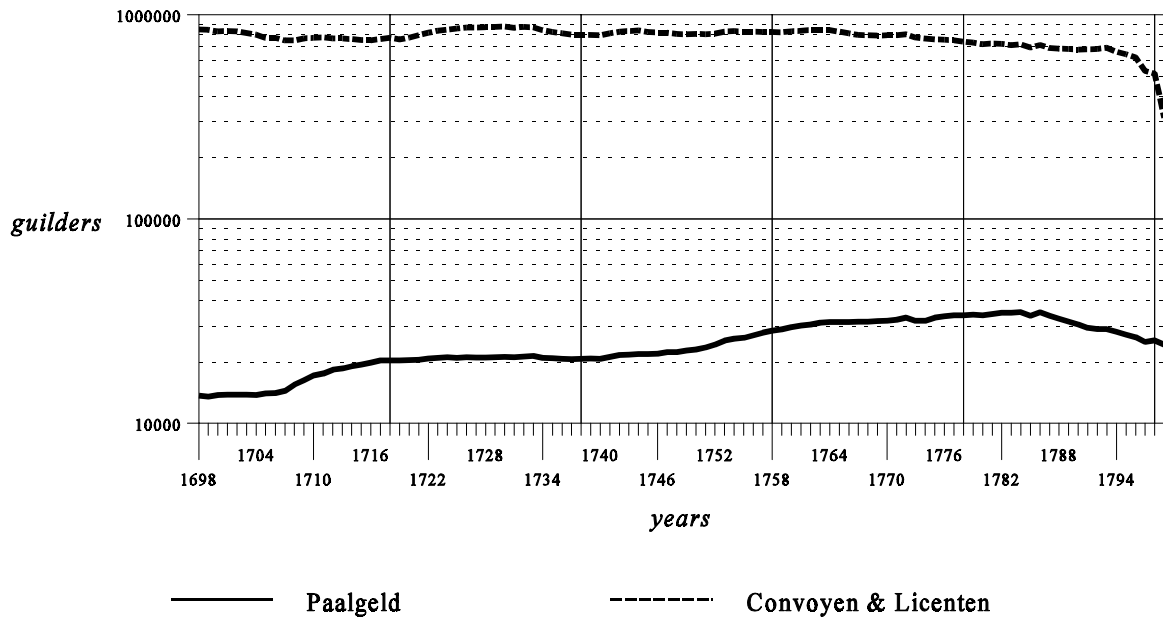


Figure 8 Revenues in guilders of the *Paalgeld* and *Convoyen* and *Licenten* 1698-1800 in 13 year moving averages semilog. Source: Heeres (1982,1), Oldewelt (1953)

the smaller ports like Enkhuizen and Hoorn. But not all smaller ports saw that downswing. Although the first part of the century was a period of constant decline for Harlingen in Friesland, from the middle of the century there was consolidation and at the end even an upswing. As figure 7 shows, the Groningen port of Delfzijl on the mouth of the Eems-river saw an upswing that may underline the growing importance of the traffic in smaller boats on the Wadden Zee to Northern Germany, the *Kleine Oost*. Here we see an uninterrupted rise over the whole century. The growing importance of the Rhine trade can be concluded from the data for Arnhem.¹⁹ Here an even steeper rise occurred during the century, only interrupted in the 1790's, when the decline was universal. The conclusion must be that although the trends are not as evident as has been suggested by De Vries²⁰, the data still provide a more or less solid basis for the theory of *internal contraction*, which implies the concentration of commercial activity to a decreasing number of ports. However, it was not Amsterdam that profited most of this development, but rather Rotterdam and Arnhem, who profited from the

¹⁹ See: J. de Vries (1959) graph XII

²⁰ J. de Vries (1959)

increased Atlantic and Rhine trade, and the Frisian and Groningen ports, that profited from the growing trade over the Wadden Zee. Amsterdam held its position as the most important port, but had to give way a little to the others.

But is this image correct? As a number of authors have indicated, the data from the *Convoyen* and *Licenten* are not without problems and the data from the revenue of the *Paalgeld* maybe much more reliable. To exclude disturbance of the overall picture by short term economic trends, the data for the *Paalgeld* and for the *Convoyen* and *Licenten* are plotted in 13-year moving averages, and in a loglinear plot to enable us to compare the development of entities of different magnitude. In spite of the semi-log projection the difference between the two curves is striking: the *Convoyen* and *Licenten* show an overall declining tendency, which even increases at the end of the eighteenth century. The revenue of the *Paalgeld* in Amsterdam however, shows a rising curve from the beginning of the century until the 1790's!

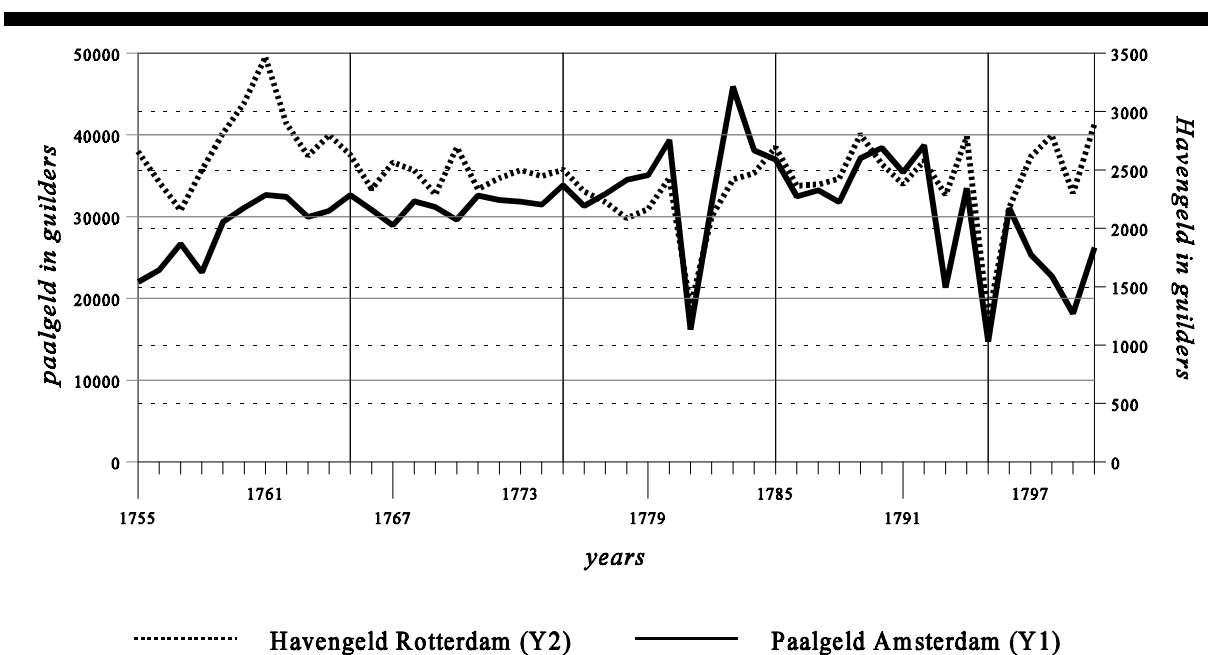


Figure 9 Revenu of the *Havengeld* in Rotterdam according to De Vries (1959) and of the *Paalgeld* in Amsterdam according to Heeres (1982,1) 1755-1800

Taking into consideration the fact that the interpretation of the *Paalgeld* data is fairly straightforward because of the unchanging basis of the levy²¹, and the complexity of the

²¹ See chapter 3.

interpretation of the data of the *Convoyen* and *Licenten*, it is obvious that the picture of the eighteenth century may not have been as gloomy as it has been depicted. It is obvious that further differentiation is needed: can we discern this rising trend in other places as well. Comparing the revenues of the *Havengeld* (port tax) in Rotterdam with the revenues of the *Paalgeld* in Amsterdam, I see the same trend for both cities. (Figure 9) Rotterdam even does a little better than Amsterdam after 1795, when a new upswing sets in.

Heeres also collected the data for the revenue of the *Buitenvuurgeld*, another levy that was collected in the ports on the *Zuider Zee*, which were never published. Until 1780 these data show the same trend as the revenue of the *Paalgeld*, but after 1780 there is a strong decline for the smaller ports. On the whole one must conclude that the process of internal contraction cannot be traced easily before 1780 in the data that are now available. After that year there seems to have been some contraction, but maybe even more on Rotterdam than on Amsterdam. This might be another indication of the growing importance of the trans-Atlantic trade, in which Rotterdam had an ever growing share.

As far as trade is concerned the second part of the eighteenth century was not so bad for Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the two most important ports of the Netherlands. The other ports have suffered in the aftermath of the fourth Anglo-Dutch war of 1780-1784. In chapter 5 we will have a closer look at the various sectors of the trade of Amsterdam and we will identify growth and decline for several regions.