The First Global War: The Dutch versus Iberia in Asia, Africa and the New World, 1590-1609

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Abstract

Are the beginnings of the Dutch expansion outside Europe to be viewed as war or commerce? In assessing the damage done by the Dutch to the various Iberian trade circuits in Asia and the Atlantic during the period between 1585 and 1609, this contribution shows that the Dutch actions against Spain and Portugal had virtually no effect. The Dutch - as well as the other Northwest European powers - could not seriously harm the Iberian expansion system. After 1620 this situation changed, but it remains remarkable that between 1500 and 1800 two expansion systems continued to co-exist in Asia, Africa and the New World.

Keywords

Dutch expansion, Global Warfare, Sefardi Jews, Dutch East India Company, Dutch West India Company

a) The Iberian Expansion System

It seems remarkable that the world outside Europe should have played such an important role in the Dutch struggle for independence against Spain. Before the beginning of the Dutch rebellion, the non-European world was peripheral to the economic interests of the insurgents. However, after the fall of Antwerp in 1585, the Northern Netherlands started a global war with the Iberian powers in Asia, on the coast of West Africa, in parts of South and North America and in the Caribbean. This global war was waged in part with the objective of harming the enemy and in part to increase the benefits derived from trade, which in turn would help to finance the war effort. On the Iberian Peninsula, the profits derived from intercontinental trade and overseas colonization contributed significantly to the financing of the Spanish armies and navies used against the Dutch insurgents. By rapidly expanding to the East and West, the Dutch were hoping to transfer some of those benefits from Spain to themselves.

In order to understand the beginning of the Dutch exploits outside Europe, it is important to survey the structure of the first or Iberian expansion system in order to pinpoint those areas that were most prone to penetration and attacks by the Dutch. The Iberian maritime empire consisted of seven separate circuits. First of all, the Atlantic islands and the west coast of Africa should be mentioned as the first circuit of the Iberian expansion system. The first explorers from Europe in this part of the world were the Portuguese. They traded with the Senegambia region, as well as with the Gold Coast. In these two areas, the Portuguese had hardly any footholds; they only established regular contacts with the Africans along the coast and did not attempt to conquer or occupy any part of it. In addition to these two trading regions, the Portuguese made contact with the Congo and Angola. In both areas the Portuguese extended their influence beyond trade. In the kingdom of the Congo the Portuguese missionaries converted part of the population to Christianity. In Angola the Portuguese established some