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Lorrendrayen op Africa : de illegale goederen- en slavenhandel op West-Afrika tijdens het achttiende-eeuwse handelsmonopolie van de West-Indische Compagnie, 1700-1734

Paesie, R.

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Summary

On the third of June 1621 the States-General granted the charter to the West India Company, with which she acquired the exclusive right to the shipping and trade in the Atlantic area. All private companies for the West African trade were officially dissolved afterwards. In spite of this the WIC was very soon confronted with evasion of the trade monopoly. Dutch merchants in particular were against companies with a strong monopolistic character and during the first half of the seventeenth century they managed to stipulate free trade in certain areas of the WIC charter area. Although their colleagues from Zeeland were initially against partial dissolution of the trade monopoly, after the Treaty of Munster they were to become increasingly involved in illegal trade of goods and slaves. This shift from monopoly to free trade politics in Zeeland halfway through the seventeenth century can be explained by the economic decline in the area. Furthermore the people from Zeeland had always had many trade interests in the Atlantic area and they had a long tradition in dangerous shipping. Evasion of the trade monopoly was one of the facets of this sea trade. After the bankruptcy of the first WIC and the establishment of the second WIC the illegal trade in West Africa would become very much a matter concerning Zeeland. Although there was a permanent illegal trade in goods and slaves, the intensity was subject to strong fluctuation. In times of war many ship owners from Zeeland switched to privateering only to switch back to interloping in peacetime. From 1685 the illegal sea trade to West Africa increased considerably, reaching its peak after the Spanish War of Succession. Many interlopers were fitted out in the Republic in the post war years. Initially the illegal traders focused on the trade in African goods but at the end of the seventeenth century they increasingly focused on the slave trade. About a third of the illegal slave traders were involved in the triangular slave trade. Still the Company was able to strike a couple of severe blows to the interloper trade and in the first five years after the Treaty of Utrecht 28 interlopers were captured by Company ships. A record in the history of the WIC.

The WIC tried to contain the interloping trade by fighting it in every possible way. However at the end of the seventeenth century the illegal trade would expand dramatically and during the first charter period of the second WIC an estimated 320 to 350 Dutch interlopers were fitted out for the trade in illegal goods in West Africa. This number would increase in the eighteenth century to over five hundred of which 442 have been traced. Comparing these numbers with those of the WIC we can merely conclude that in the last quarter of the seventeenth century the size of the interloping business, measured in ships voyages, was the same as that of the WIC. The strong increase that occurred in the eighteenth century meant that the number would by far exceed the number of company ships. The amount of illegal trips was

almost twice as much as those of the Company. Before the States-General granted the revised charter to the WIC in 1730 the illegal business had already peaked. After 1720 there was a decline in interloping because of a successful campaign against it by the WIC and the recruitment of former captains of interloper ships by the Company. Besides this, in 1720 a lot of merchants from Zeeland invested in the newly established Middelburg Commercial Company (MCC) which would become a major player on the African coast. The illegal trade was at its peak from 1685 to 1720. A total of 725 runs of interlopers have been traced back to the two charter periods of the second WIC (1674-1730). We can conclude from those numbers that between 800 to 850 interlopers sailed to West Africa. More than three quarters of those came from Zeeland.

Those behind the illegal trade were both merchants and regents or members of prominent regent families. They were part of the socio-economic elite of Zeeland. There were also merchants and regents from Holland involved in the illegal trade on West Africa and for reasons of safety many of them collaborated with merchants from Zeeland. Others, mainly Sephardic or Ashkenazic Jews, used other channels and their business partners were mainly based on the Iberian peninsula.

The illegal goods and slave trade in West Africa could be extremely profitable for investors but could also result in huge losses. There were several ways of spreading the risk involved in interloping. The usual way in the eighteenth century was profit sharing by a shared shipping company. Several people took care of the fitting out and financing of the ships. One person would act as bookkeeper and would be responsible for the fitting out of the ships and the paper work.

Another form of risk control was spread investments, where merchants not only invested in interloping but also in privateering and regular trade in, for instance the Mediterranean, the Levant or the West Indies. Besides that they also had interests in the production of gunpowder or ropes. Investments in big companies like the WIC and the VOC were also options. Being major participants in these companies they had access to valuable information concerning West African markets and in a way could influence the policy. Despite the many small shared companies this didn't mean that the organisation structure became fractured. There was a large network of merchants and regents both at home and abroad who were involved in the illegal trade in Africa. Because of strong representation in city and regional governing bodies those involved enjoyed plenty of protection. The level of organisation was high and certainly as good as that of the Company.

The crews of the illegal traders, in particular the officers, were mainly from Zeeland and driven by an attractive reward system were willing to take part in the risky shipping business. Knowledge of the West African coast and its markets was of great importance for a successful trip. Preparation was also very important. The organisers of illegal trips were well informed about the demand for goods in Africa and the risks that were involved. That's why many interlopers were insured against the dangers at sea. Insurers demanded high premiums that could rise to above thirty percent during war time. Equipment was also very important and most interlopers

were midsized frigates that were superior to enemy vessels. Most of them were also well armed and weren't afraid of confrontations with Company ships. Between 1698 and 1724 there were 19 sea battles between interlopers and vessels from the WIC near the coast of West Africa, which cost the lives of 150 seamen on Company ships. As well as having fast, well armed ships, the experienced captains were well instructed and had all the necessary passes that ensured a safe passage to Africa or that made it possible to evade the WIC charter. Interlopers didn't own trade forts on the West African coasts but with low pricing or gifts they could bribe high ranking WIC officers. In this way they could operate easily within the area. Furthermore they were welcome guests of foreign Trade Companies where they enjoyed open and covert protection. Just like the WIC they had the use of a Caribbean island as a storage depot for slaves.

The governments in Zeeland were well informed about the activities of the interlopers but didn't take action against them. The protection that the illegal traders got from these governments can be seen as a way of keeping the trade afloat. For many regents in Zeeland the ban on free trade to West Africa and the actions against interloping was an attempt to destroy Zeeland economically. They were convinced that Holland was excluding them from the lucrative trade on West Africa like they had done in war time through a ban on trading in brandy which badly affected merchants from Zeeland.

Just like the WIC the Dutch interlopers exported an extensive assortment of merchandise from the Republic to the West African coast. The goods they exported varied according to African demand. Usually those involved in illegal trade were better at anticipating African demands than the WIC. The most important products were textiles, fire arms and gunpowder, metal products and alcohol and to a lesser extent beads, cowries and other products were imported in Africa.

The interlopers merchandise differed from that of the WIC. They carried many more military products and sometimes they stored tens of thousands of pounds of gunpowder in the holds. Cowries were hardly ever on the cargo list of illegal traders. These differences were mainly caused by the demand in certain areas where the interlopers mostly traded.

Another difference was the way in which they did business. Interlopers didn't own trade fortresses on the African coast and had to resort to time consuming coastal trade where they had to visit more places. The barter trade therefore took place on board the ships where gold, ivory and slaves were purchased. In this trade caboceers or brokers played an important part. In contrast with the WIC there was no clear division between the trade in goods or slaves. However ships were fitted for a primary target, for instance the trade in goods whereby the acquired slaves were meant for the distributive trade. The scope of the trade in goods was larger than that of the WIC at certain times. Especially during peacetime loads of gold and ivory were exported from Africa to Europe. The trade in gum was practically all in private hands.

Despite the triangular slave trade being a complex enterprise, the illegal traders

managed to establish an effective logistical structure where they could operate successfully in. About one third of the Dutch interlopers were fitted primarily for the transatlantic slave trade. The illegal slave traders used prefabricated wooden constructions with which they put the slaves in the ships before they took them over the Atlantic and for the sale in America they had contracts with foreign trading companies. Also, many slaves were taken to the islands of St Eustatius and St Thomas which functioned as slave depots for the surrounding islands.

The illegal slave trade was much bigger than has been realised up to now. Apart from the 5.000 to 10.000 slaves who were meant for the distributive trade, about 40.000 slaves were taken to America where they were traded in for cash or West Indian products.

The WIC fought against the interloping trade as best it could and had cruisers stationed almost permanently in the coastal waters of West Africa during the last (unchanged) charter period (1700-1730). This maritime maintaining of the charter was a costly business. The patrol ships were midsize to large frigates with an armament of 20 to 30 guns. This equipment was mainly provided by the Amsterdam chamber of the WIC who also took care of the appointing and selecting of the crew which numbered about a hundred on cruisers. The specific and often difficult circumstances demanded experienced captains. Therefore the directors preferably selected experienced seamen. They didn't always succeed however and because of a lack of qualified captains they sometimes had to resort to appointing former captains of interlopers. Almost thirty of these did service on Company ships during the first three decades of the eighteenth century. Five of whom were captains on Company cruisers. Around 1720 this remarkable policy even became part of a political direction that the WIC used against the interloping business by taking away their experienced officers. In practice it didn't always work out that way, illegal trade did decline but the Company was also confronted with some undesirable situations.

Not only were Company cruisers used against interlopers from the Republic but also against Portuguese smugglers who, from the end of the seventeenth century, increasingly traded slaves between Brazil and West Africa. The Portuguese were not forbidden to trade on the West African coast as long as they got a trade pass in Elmina. This was provided after they had paid ten percent of their cargo as toll money. However it was forbidden for them to trade European merchandise. Only Brazilian products were allowed. If these rules were broken the purchased slaves or contraband were confiscated. Between 1700 and 1730 a total of 90 Portuguese smuggling ships were apprehended in Elmina and had their cargo confiscated. Cruisers were also used for secondary purposes which could have been either military or trade. In this way they functioned as merchant ships because they carried Company merchandise and foodstuffs for the Company staff in West Africa and shipped African products back home. The military aspect took on several forms. In wartime the ships functioned as convoys against French privateering vessels and in peacetime they were used in several missions. After the Dutch inter-

lopers were taken to Elmina an inventory was made and the whole was valued. This was done for two purposes. On the one hand so they could get a value provision for the Company and on the other to assess the booty for the crew of the cruisers. It was also a means of control against theft by that same crew. Afterwards there was a trial and despite the harsh sentences that could be expected for violation of the charter regulations, they were never fulfilled. Mostly former seamen of illegal traders went into Company service with the same wages and position as they had before.

In the struggle against the illegal trade the Company was successful in that it covered the costs of purchasing and fitting out the cruisers. It even resulted in a surplus. However one must note that only ten percent of all Dutch interlopers were confiscated by Company ships. Therefore the real damage caused by the illegal traders to the Company would have been substantially larger. Unfortunately there are no figures to estimate the damage but we can assume that it surpassed the successes booked by the Company in the battle against the illegal trade.