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Peeking at the enemy. Eighteenth century 'spy' plan reveals VOC military intelligence

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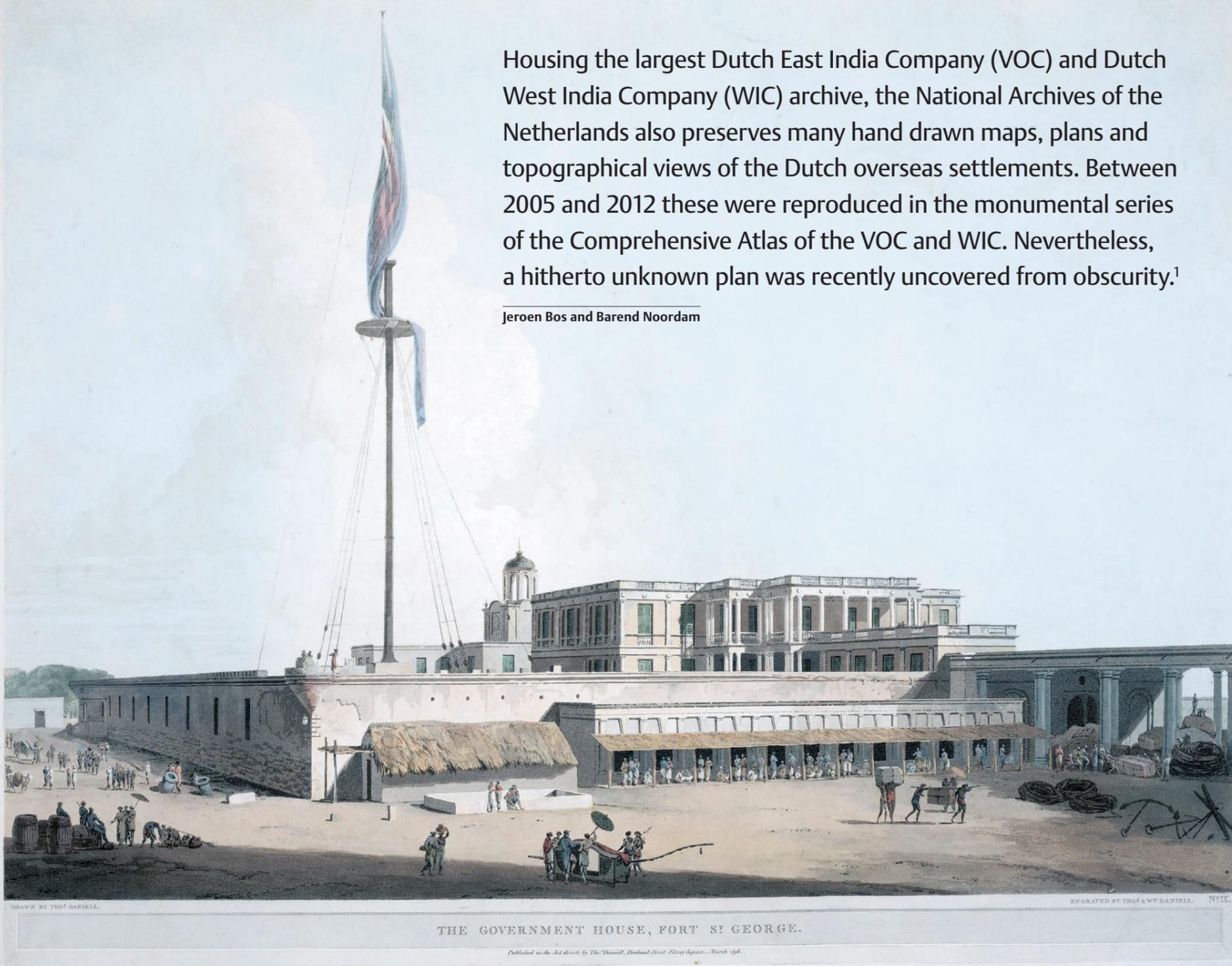
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Peeking at the enemy

Housing the largest Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Dutch West India Company (WIC) archive, the National Archives of the Netherlands also preserves many hand drawn maps, plans and topographical views of the Dutch overseas settlements. Between 2005 and 2012 these were reproduced in the monumental series of the Comprehensive Atlas of the VOC and WIC. Nevertheless, a hitherto unknown plan was recently uncovered from obscurity.¹

Jeroen Bos and Barend Noordam



Above: Thomas Daniell (1749-1840), *The Government House, Fort St George, Madras, 1798*. Aquatint, 54 x 74 cm, (c) British Library Board, P944.

THIS PLAN OF THE FORTRESS OF MADRAS (present-day Chennai) was made by the military engineer Carl Friedrich Reimer, who was employed by the Dutch East India Company (in short: VOC, after *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*), and can be considered an example of how a long-distance trading company gathered (military) intelligence at the closure of the eighteenth century. This was just a decade before the Napoleonic Wars dramatically changed the role and significance of military intelligence, and trading companies were replaced by larger political and economic entities that found their apogee in the formation of the colonial empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Prologue

In the final quarter of the eighteenth century the Dutch struggled to survive in the rapidly changing trading world and did not fully adapt to new commercial configurations, instead sticking firmly to the monopolistic mode. Especially after the disastrous conclusion of the Fourth Dutch-Anglo War (1780-1784) it was clear to anyone that the Dutch Republic had lost its prominent place as a leading European power. In Europe the decline already set in after the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48). In Asia the Dutch, represented by the VOC, could preserve their leading role for a longer period. It was basically keeping up appearances, however, because internally the executives [*bewindvoerders*] were very well aware of the deplorable (financial) state of affairs.

The final blow, in Europe as well as in Asia, was dealt when the British presented peace terms to the Dutch in 1784. The results of the negotiations appeared not too disastrous for the situation in Asia; the conquered settlements were given back to the Dutch, with the one exception being Nagapattinam. The former Dutch main stronghold on the Coromandel coast was to remain in British hands. Although theoretically the Dutch could pick up where they had left off, their former position in the Asian trading network was never regained. Dutch involvement on the Indian subcontinent was especially marginalized.²

Military commission

The executives turned to the highest political institution, the States General [*Staten-Generaal*], for financial and military support. They pointed to the (alleged) gains the VOC generated, in terms of tax revenues and the employment of their countrymen. On several occasions the States General gave in to their pleas and provided loans or equipped an entire naval fleet in order to suppress indigenous resistance. In 1786, when yet another appeal was made, it was decided that a new loan would only be given after an independent inspection of the overseas settlements was carried out by a Military Commission. Its members would be appointed by Stadtholder Prince Willem V.

It took two years before the Commission was staffed and could set sail for Asia. Reason for this delay was the political turmoil within the Dutch Republic. The system, headed by the Stadtholder, had its proponents (*Orangisten*) and opponents (*Patriotten*) and the two groups regularly clashed, verbally or by spreading anonymous pamphlets. Tensions reached a violent climax in 1787. After the Prussian intervention in September the leadership of Willem V was restored, leading to a fragile status quo. Underneath the surface, however, the conflict persisted and never really faded. As a result of this unsatisfactory outcome, political decision making was paralyzed. Even the nomination of the military commissioners became politically laden and took far too long, but in the end Captain J.O. Vaillant, Captain C.A. VerHuell and Lieutenant Colonel J.F.L. Graevestein were appointed to head the Military Commission.

Their appointment was a clear indication that the Stadtholder, on the behest of the Dutch army and navy, attempted to strengthen his grip on the Dutch overseas empire. Although the formation of the VOC and WIC, in 1602 and 1621 respectively, were based on political decision making, both long-distance trading companies could permit themselves to loosen the political bonds with the States General and Stadtholder in the course of the seventeenth

century. From the middle of the eighteenth century, however, the Stadtholder attempted to renew the ties with the overseas empire; in commercial, political as well as military affairs. In the years preceding the installation of the Military Commission the Stadtholder already offered high (military) positions within the VOC hierarchy to his confidants. The inspection tour by the Military Commission was a next step in the process of colonial empire building.³

Reception

The fleet of the Military Commission could finally set sail for Asia in February 1789. The first important stop on the route was the African Cape Colony. In Africa, as well as at the Dutch settlements in Asia, the commissioners noted a lukewarm reception by the local VOC-authorities. The authorities observed them with much skepticism, because the Commission had a mandate to operate outside the traditional chain of command. Distrust or – what struck Vaillant and VerHuell even more – a total lack of interest in military affairs were frequent responses to their activities.

The highest VOC-authorities in Asia, the High Government [*Hoge Regering*], presiding at Batavia (present-day Jakarta), displayed a more positive stance towards the Military Commission. Although not pleased with the idea of prying eyes, the graveness of the situation was agreed upon. For a guiding role in the process, the High Government reasoned that direct participation was essential. It was therefore decided that Carl Friedrich Reimer, the most capable military engineer in the service of the VOC at that time, was to be sent to assist the commissioners in the role of advisor and (main) cartographer. To ensure treatment as an equal to the commissioners, Reimer was promptly promoted to the rank of Major. After receiving instructions by the High Government, Reimer was sent to Ceylon. Here he would await the arrival of the fleet, sailing from the Cape Colony, and join the commission for a period spanning nearly two years.

Eighteenth century 'spy' plan reveals VOC military intelligence

Professionalization

Reimer made a career within the VOC as a self-made man.⁴ He had been trained as a land surveyor, but little is known about his personal life prior to his VOC enrollment. Since he functioned as a junior surgeon in his early years of service on Ceylon, he must also have picked up some rudimentary knowledge of medicine. As most of his countrymen, the Prussian-born engineer initially enlisted in the ranks of soldier. Thanks to his skills, Reimer was noted by his superiors and worked his way up in the Company hierarchy, enjoying patronage by senior officials along the line.⁵

Reimer witnessed an important transitional phase: the slow but steady professionalization of the land surveyors into a corps of trained military engineers. Until the middle of the eighteenth century land surveying was considered a craft and the surveyors were placed under a superintendent overseeing all construction work. These artisans were more and more replaced by military professionals who had enjoyed a military education. Reimer embodied that transition.⁶ By joining the Military Commission, he became an extension of the Dutch army. As the navy, army and the Stadtholder were all trying to stretch their overseas influence via the Military Commission, Reimer clearly struggled with his new role. Although his allegiance should have been first and foremost with the Commission, he was very well aware of the Company patronage he had enjoyed in the preceding years. And so, he continued to send reports to the High Government in Batavia, while at the same time performing his duties as a member of the Commission.

Coromandel coast

Although the Commission worked on a very tight schedule, the members afforded themselves 'leisure time' during their inspection of the Dutch settlements along the Coromandel coast. Visits to the Danish at Tranquebar and the British at Madras were planned, and would prove to be a great opportunity to take a peek at the European competitors. The commissioners were amiably received by the Danish and British, although both nations were fully aware of the true intentions of their Dutch visitors. The visit to Madras was therefore subject to several restrictions. For instance, Reimer and his fellow members could not walk freely through the town or fortress. In his report, Reimer wrote that he was only once allowed a partial walk around the defenses, and even then only under strict British guidance. This explains the blank areas on the plan. The engineer remarked that his predecessors would not hesitate to produce a plan in which every corner was drawn. Being a professional military engineer, he could not rely on speculation and highly criticized this practice. According to Reimer, accuracy should be the leading principle in mapmaking and cartography. Because he had not seen the British defenses in its entirety, he would only draft what he had actually seen. From the sources, the engineer appears to have been a very humble man. More than once he apologized for the incomplete plan he had made. Incomplete as it may be, when comparing his plan with official British maps of fort St. George the accuracy is striking. When Vaillant, VerHuell and Graevestein wrote positively on Reimer's work pace and high quality of map-making, they were not merely being polite.

Military intelligence

Reimer's mapping activities should also be considered an example of the extent to which (military) intelligence gathering was a concern of early modern military and political actors like the Dutch East India Company. There is still a persistent perception that pre-Napoleonic military intelligence as a practice did not amount to much more than reconnoitering the enemy's battle formations just prior to an armed confrontation.⁷ The persistence of this notion can be explained by the general paucity of modern research on this topic and the fact that early modern states and other political actors did not commit their intelligence gathering activities to paper. Recent research on the VOC wartime decision making and its information channels has revealed this fact for the seventeenth century.⁸

We have to keep in mind that military intelligence did not exist yet as it does today. There were no specific goal-oriented institutions tasked with intelligence gathering. Early modern states and other semi-political actors (like the VOC) relied on ad hoc activities, improvising according to the needs and opportunities of the moment, involving different levels of the command hierarchies. The professionalization of the study on early modern military intelligence has a long way to go. Still, research has been done on how European states – during the many conflicts of the seventeenth century – extensively sought intelligence on enemy war intentions.⁹ They did so by employing third-party double agents at rival courts, intercepting written communications, interrogating prisoners of war and actively recruiting information brokers behind enemy lines.

When dealing with the different Asian powers, the practices gained within the European theatres of war and diplomacy were used. For example, in the 1620s the VOC campaigned diplomatically and, at times, aggressively to open Ming China (1368-1644) for trade. Even in this intercultural theatre, VOC-servants took intelligence gathering seriously and endeavoured to secure knowledge through the forceful acquisition of Portuguese documentation, the translation of official Chinese communications, the employment of interpreters of mixed Chinese and Iberian descent and the quest for Chinese merchant-cum-pirate middlemen with influential connections to the Ming officialdom.¹⁰

Turning back to the late eighteenth century, the activities of Reimer and the Military Commission prove that intelligence gathering was probably not an idiosyncratic pre-occupation of some individuals during the previous century, but continued to be taken seriously by VOC-servants, as well as their competitors. The precautions taken by the Danish and the English during the Dutch visit testify that breaches in security were fully expected. Considering the Company's status as a commercial non-state actor, we can even consider Reimer's plan of fort St. George as an example of early modern corporate espionage.

Epilogue

The total production of the Military Commission was enormous. Hundreds of written pages full of analyses and recommendations are to be found at the National Archives of the Netherlands. They are accompanied by the plans and maps made by Reimer and his team of mapmakers. Although the Military Commission, back in the Republic in 1793, delivered

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an impressive final report, there was no willingness under the VOC-executives to truly reform the (military) procedures. Meanwhile, the Stadtholder and States General were distracted by the turmoil in revolutionary France. The problems besetting the Company were of lesser importance and never fully addressed until the Dutch Republic was replaced by the pro-French Batavian Republic in 1795, leading to the flight of the Stadtholder to England. Compared to the total production, this Madras report (of 'only' twenty-two pages) and the accompanying plan pale into insignificance. Nevertheless, this archival find is a welcome contribution to our growing understanding of (military) intelligence gathering within the long-distance trading companies of the early modern period.

Carl Friedrich Reimer operated as an *ancien régime* agent of military intelligence in his dual role as a member of the Military Commission and as a servant of the Dutch East India Company. When the fleet returned to Europe, he chose to stay in Asia. Because of his loyalty the High Government offered Reimer a directorship in Batavia, overseeing military and urban construction in all VOC territory, which he accepted. He performed his duties tirelessly until his death in January 1796.

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Notes

- This article is based on a handwritten report by military engineer Carl Friedrich Reimer. The hitherto unknown plan of fort St. George (Madras) was drawn as a visual companion to the report and folded between the sheets. The document can be consulted at the National Archives of the Netherlands. NL-HaNA, Collectie Alting, 1.10.03, inv.nr. 76.
- A considerable body of literature is available on the decline of the VOC in the eighteenth century. We can recommend the analysis of the matter in Jacobs, E.M. 2006. *Merchant in Asia: the trade of the Dutch East India Company during the eighteenth century*, Leiden: CNWS.
- For the growing influence of the Stadtholder, army and navy on the overseas military affairs, see Zandvliet, K. 2002. 'Vestingbouw in de Oost', in Knaap, G. et al. (eds.) *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie: tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, Leiden: KITLV Press, pp.150-180.
- An unpublished MA thesis on Carl Friedrich Reimer is still the most informative source on the life and work of the Prussian military engineer in the service of the VOC: van Gerven, M.R. 2002. *C.F. Reimer, een werkzaam mensch: De Militaire Commissie naar Azië, 1789-1793*.
- Reimer was born in Königsberg (present-day Kaliningrad) and entered VOC service as a soldier in December 1767. He functioned as a (junior) surgeon on Ceylon until 1777. In that year he was promoted to ensign-engineer and his main task became land surveying. Before his involvement with the Military Commission he was promoted once more and became lieutenant-engineer in 1785.
- For the gradual professionalization of the colonial military engineer, see Zandvliet, K. 1988. 'Kolonisatie en cartografie in de Oost: de rol van de militaire ingenieurs', in van Mil, P. et al. (eds.) *De VOC in de kaart gekeken: cartografie en navigatie van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, 1602-1799*, 's-Gravenhage: SDU, pp.117-148.
- See for example the assessments of van Creveld, M. 1985. *Command in war*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp.17-23; Kahn, D. 2009. 'An historical theory of intelligence', in P. Gill, et al. (eds.) *Intelligence theory: key questions and debates*. London: Routledge, pp.4-15. A notable exception to this disregard for early modern (military) intelligence is to be found in Keegan, J. 2003. *Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Mostert, T. 2007. *Chain of command: The military system of the Dutch East India Company, 1655-1663*, Unpublished MA thesis available online at <http://vocwarfare.net/thesis/> (retrieved 28-09-2011) pp.54-57.
- Examples of this research include Croxton, D. 2000. 'The prosperity of arms is never continual: Military intelligence, surprise, and diplomacy in 1640s Germany', *The Journal of Military History* 64/4, pp.981-1003; Donagan, B. 2008. *War in England 1642-1649*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Storrs, C. 2006. 'Intelligence and the formulation of policy and strategy in early modern Europe: The Spanish monarchy in the reign of Charles II (1665-1700)', *Intelligence and National Security* 21(4):493-519.
- Much of the source material has been collected in Groeneveldt, W.P. 1898. *De Nederlanders in China. De eerste bemoeiingen om den handel in China en de vestiging in de Pescadores (1601-1624)*, 's-Gravenhage: Nijhoff.

Below: Plan of the defences of fort St. George (Madras), made as a visual companion to a handwritten report by military engineer Carl Friedrich Reimer in 1790. NL-HaNA, Collectie Alting, 1.10.03, inv.nr. 76

