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## **Review of Nimwegen, O. van (2017) De Nederlandse burgeroorlog, 1748-1815**

Lauret, L.B.

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## Review

Olaf van Nimwegen, *De Nederlandse Burgeroorlog, 1748-1815*, Amsterdam, Prometheus, 2017, 432 pp. ISBN 9789035144293.



Olaf van Nimwegen is on a mission in his latest study *De Nederlandse burgeroorlog (1748-1815)* (*The Dutch Civil War, 1748-1815*). Since the bicentennial of the patriot revolution in 1987, revisionist historians have redefined the decades around 1800 as a major turning point in Dutch history. They have focused on the new political ideas of the patriots, and how these ideas overthrew the stadtholderate and fundamentally changed the Dutch Republic in 1795. Historians have covered a wide range of aspects of society influenced by the patriots, ranging from the political press and public opinion to financial policy and education. The focus on the intellectual history has made it clear that the patriots held stadtholder William v (1748-1806) accountable for the malaise of the Republic. So far, however, the military dimension of the patriot era had been the missing element in revisionist historiography. Van Nimwegen thus aims to incorporate

the civil war in the debate on William v, the patriot era, and the role of armed forces in politics between 1748 and 1815.

The scale of the military conflict between the patriots and the stadtholder was too small for a prominent place in national historiography. Strictly speaking, the civil war took place around Utrecht and only lasted for five months between 9 May and September 1787. Yet despite its briefness the conflict had a major impact on society. According to Van Nimwegen, the first fight near Utrecht had similar disproportionate political consequences as, for example, the canon attack at Valmy (on 20 September 1792) and Bull Run in the United States (21 July 1861). Under the inspiring leadership of the German prince Friedrich, Count von Salm-Grumbach (1745-1794), the patriots had proven that armed citizens were a force to be reckoned with on the battle field. Yet the unexpected surrender

of Utrecht without a single shot has become the symbol of the patriots' military incapability. Contemporary assessments have misled historians like Colenbrander and De Wit (1974) to denounce the patriot military efforts as mere show (256, 278). This has clouded our view of the unique situation in Dutch (military) history: in Utrecht professional soldiers fought alongside civic militias.

In contrast to what the book title suggests, however, Van Nimwegen's main concern is to explain the establishment of the national army in 1815. The plans for this new army had been made in 1785 amidst the patriot revolution. Change and continuity in military loyalty are at the heart of Van Nimwegen's argument (208-209). Von Clausewitz (1837) was the first to acknowledge the special context of the Dutch civil war. In comparison with other European countries, the Dutch Republic had the most complicated power relation between government and the armed forces (316). Van Nimwegen expertly explains these political ties and their meaning for military reform. The book builds on his extensive knowledge of the army before 1747, which he documented in his award-winning study *De Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden als grote mogendheid. Buitenlandse politiek en oorlogvoering in de eerste helft van de achttiende eeuw en in het bijzonder tijdens de Oostenrijkse Successieoorlog (1740-1748)* (Amsterdam 2002). Based on thorough archival research, Van Nimwegen eloquently outlines all the elements involved in the functioning of the army before the eve of the first armed conflict near Utrecht.

The army consisted of internationally recruited soldiers, and was divided over the seven provinces. The oath that officers and soldiers took explains the entangled power relations between the army and the government (71). The highest authority in the Republic resided with the Provincial States. Soldiers and officers thus swore an oath to the States-General, but also to the States who paid them, to the States of the province where they resided, and finally to the local magistrate of the region where they were stationed. The stadtholder had supreme command of the troops, but he was not included in the oath. In an attempt to make the army loyal to him, he had incorporated the distribution of army positions in his system of patronage (142-145). This resulted in an army of officers, rather than soldiers. Secondly, he had broken the tradition of garrison cities. This move severed the ties between soldiers and citizens that had existed since 1588 (115-116). The Fourth Anglo-Dutch War and armed conflict with Joseph II exposed the inability of William V to defend the Republic and the army organisation as the worst of Europe (127). Patriots saw no other option than to fulfil article eight of the Union of Utrecht, which gave citizens the right to bear arms (96). They wanted to curb the authority of the stadtholder, but they struggled to define the role of the professional army next to the civic militias. In the States-General, Bicker proposed to establish a national army composed of unmarried professional soldiers, aided by a conscription army. In 1785 this plan was deemed too radical, because it left little room for the authority of the States and local magistrates (120-122).

Van Nimwegen adds great depth to the chronological chapters on the civil war, because he uses the ideological views of the patriots as well as the allegiance of officers and soldiers to contextualise their behaviour during these chaotic months. This results in multiple reassessments of military officers (134, 18, 256, and 303) and of William V and his wife (294). Historical records debunk the myth that professional soldiers and civic militia had abandoned Utrecht as soon as Prussia had sent an ultimatum (278). More significantly, Van

Nimwegen points out that one of the most striking aspects of the civil war was the reluctance of the troops to act against their oath. This traditional notion determined whether or not a regiment could legitimately side with the stadtholder or the patriots. But Van Nimwegen also credits a new kind of loyalty for this decision. Officers and soldiers could pledge allegiance based on their responsibility as a citizen to defend the Dutch nation (360).

The civil war angle in the patriot revolution adds a valuable new perspective to understand the behaviour of the stadtholder, the patriots, and the military. It also explains why the deep divisions in society were carried over to the Batavian Republic. Moreover, the tradition of local authority and control over the armed forces by citizens proved resilient. With these insights Van Nimwegen will undoubtedly enrich the discussion among Dutch historians about the decades around 1800 – although Van Nimwegen could have positioned his work more thoroughly within the literature he now lists at the end of his introduction. In analysing the importance of traditional and new loyalties in the construction of the Dutch national army, Van Nimwegen's study is also relevant for international scholars of the revolutionary era. Katherine Aaslestad has recently pointed out that historians still seem to disagree whether these decades of war presented transformative ruptures in the way people lived, or whether patterns of continuity helped society face new challenges.<sup>1</sup> Van Nimwegen's book suggests that in the Dutch Republic, at least, both old and new loyalties helped the military to consciously chose a side in the political conflict between the stadtholder and the patriots. Finally, it is no small feat that this richly illustrated and well-documented book has made the military dimension of the patriot era accessible to a wider audience in the Netherlands.

Lauren Lauret, Universiteit Leiden

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Aaslestad, 'New Military History and the Napoleonic Wars', *Militär-geschichtliche Zeitschrift* 76 (2017/1) 146-151, here 148.