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THE ABSENCE OF COUPS D'ETAT. THE CASE OF THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract

The Netherlands has no tradition of armed forces intervening in political affairs. In Dutch history there are plenty examples of revolts, wars, social unrests and revolutions but only two true coups d'état in the classical sense of the word, and they were over two centuries ago in 1798. Rather than over-analyzing these two meagre examples from the Revolutionary Era, this article focuses on the question why The Netherlands has had no military coups since. What is it that prevents the Dutch military from directly interfering with politics? Does it have to do with the embedding of the armed forces in the political system? Or maybe with the existing military culture of the country, with civil-military relations, or with something else completely?

Introduction

Much has been written about why and how coups d'état occur. Less has been written about why they don't occur, although that's also an interesting question. This paper focuses on the absence of coups and asks the question why in some countries the armed forces do intervene in politics, while in others, like The Netherlands, they stay on the sideline. The almost complete lack of coups d'état in Dutch history demands an explanation.

The last, and only, coups in Dutch history were over two hundred years ago, in 1798 to be precise. It was during the very troubled period after the French Revolution and the French 'liberation' of the Dutch Republic that the newly created Batavian army intervened twice in quick succession. In January 1798, it intervened on behalf of the more radical forces in Dutch politics. The moderates, who were blamed for hampering important political reforms, were removed from the National Congress, giving the more radical factions the opportunity to adopt a very progressive new constitution, the first constitution in Dutch history. Half a year later, in June, the army intervened a second time, this time to remove the radicals it had brought to power only six months before.[1]

Both interventions were 'classic', in the sense that they followed a pattern we recognize from later, more recent coups d'état. The commander and chief of the Dutch army, general Herman Daendels, ordered his troops to block all roads leading to and from The Hague, the seat of parliament. Before sunrise army personnel went to the homes of the leading political adversaries to arrest them. And in the morning soldiers were sent to the National Congress to depose of the remaining opposition. The whole coup took only a couple of hours. At 2 PM the transition was completed and the soldiers were ordered to return to their barracks. The second coup, six months later, went roughly the same. During both coups no shots were fired and no blood was spilt.[2]

Although both coups were important watershed moments in Dutch political history, in the greater scheme of things they weren't that special. Coups and regime changes were very common in this time period, they were rather the rule than the exception. What **ís** special, is that after 1798 no military coup has taken place in The Netherlands. In the more than two centuries since, there have been a handful of rumors of officers plotting against the legitimate government, but those schemes never led to any concrete actions.

How is that possible? What is it that prevents the Dutch military from directly interfering with politics? Does it have to do with the embedding of the armed forces in the political system? Or is it related, perhaps, to the existing military culture of the country, with civil-military relations, or with something else completely? This article will be the reflection of an initial search for the main reasons why certain countries, like in this case The Netherlands, don't get affected by the 'coup-virus'.

General Literature

For the Dutch case these questions have never been explored. In a sense, this is not illogical, because why would you research something that never happened? Why would

1 . J. Oddens, *Pioniers in schaduwbeeld. Het eerste parlement van Nederland 1796-1798* (Nijmegen 2012) 302-317; N.C.F. van Sas, *Bataafse terreur. De betekenis van 1798* (Nijmegen 2011); Wyger Velema, ' Republikeinse democratie. De politieke wereld van de Bataafse Revolutie, 1795-1798', in: Frans Grijzenhout, Niek van Sas en Wyger Velema (ed.), *Het Bataafse experiment. Politiek en cultuur rond 1800* (Nijmegen 2013) 27-64, aldaar 35-51; C.H.E. de Wit, *De strijd tussen aristocratie en democratie in Nederland 1780-1848* (Heerlen 1965) 153-173.

2 . Paul van 't Veer, *Daendels. Maarschalk van Holland* (Zeist en Antwerpen 1963) 67-78.

you study military interventions in a country that has had slim to none? Luckily, political and social scientists have written a lot about coups d'état in general: how they work, what role the military takes, and what factors make some countries more prone to coup attempts than others. Especially this last point is of interest to this paper, because if we can agree on the main reasons behind coup attempts, successful or not, we can compare those reasons with the situation in The Netherlands.

In a nutshell coups derive from two different sets of circumstances. First, they can be the result of social unrest in the broader society. If this unrest is wide enough and lasts long enough, the military can feel obliged to intervene because of pressure from certain societal groups frustrated with the way things are going. The 1952 coup in Egypt is a good example of this. Secondly, coups can also come from the military itself. Sometimes officers or soldiers get so frustrated with certain policy decisions, for example severe army budget cuts or certain strategic choices, that they choose to take matters into their own hands. This can be seen in the coup attempt in 1961 in Algiers, the so-called generals Putsch.[3]

When we look at the first category, social unrest/pressure, general literature shows that there are three main factors contributing to the growth of social unrest: The state of the economy, the homogeneity of the society, and the level of political participation.

Multiple researchers, from the likes of Edward Luttwak and Samuel Huntington, have linked coup attempts to economic performance.[4] In this view economic crisis, slow growth and commodity price shocks damage the legitimacy of a government and form a fertile breeding ground for social unrest and consequently for coup attempts. Time after time poverty is, or is seen as, one of the most important indicators for the risk of coups d'état. The chance of a military intervention is much higher in economically underdeveloped countries than it is in prosperous ones.

Now when we look at the Netherlands, it is obvious that poverty or economic backwardness are no factors here. Holland is one of the wealthiest countries in the world.[5] Off course it wasn't always that way, and there have been times of economic recession and even depression, but overall we can say that during the last two centuries the Dutch have prospered. Hereby removing one major reason for wanting regime change to begin with.

3 . Naunihal Singh, *Seizing Power: The Strategic logic of Military Coups* (2014) 18-19.

4 . Edward Luttwak, *Coup d'Etat. A practical Handbook* (1968) 31-32; Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven 1968) 194.

5 .https://www.allianz.com/en/economic_research/insights/publications/allianz-global-wealth-report-2023/appendices.html

The homogeneity of the society

The second factor that can cause social troubles – the homogeneity of the society – also doesn't play a role in the Netherlands. Countries with big societal divides, whether they be religious, economic or ethnic, have a greater risk for social and political unrest. Especially if the leadership of a country is in the hands of one specific ethnic or religious group, the other groups can feel left out. Without any appeasing measures, or some form of power-sharing, minority groups can start feeling like they're second rate citizens. If this situation lasts long enough, the risk of coup attempts grows, because the unrepresented part of the population feels military intervention is the only way to change the existing situation.[6]

In the Netherlands this particular coup fostering factor is barely present. The country's population is ethnically very homogeneous and economically egalitarian, which means that the gap between rich and poor is relatively small. Only religiously you can say that there is a divide, between a protestant majority and a large catholic minority. But, while that led to civil war in the sixteenth century, during the last two hundred years Catholics and Protestants have found ways to peacefully co-exist. Since the nineteenth century Catholics were given the same rights as the Protestant majority thereby making it less necessary for them to revolt.

In most studies on coups d'état, when it comes to the role of religion, one focuses on how religious tensions can have a negative effect on a countries stability. But thinking about what role religion played in the Dutch society, I would argue in The Netherlands it was the other way around. Here, in this predominantly Calvinist country religion had a damping effect, making the country's inhabitants less likely to carry out a coup attempt.

For hundreds of years a large part of the population was brought up with Calvinist beliefs, learning that you have to obey and respect any authorities put above you, because it was God who placed them there. If you internalize this and you know not to interfere with the God-given order of things, it's no surprise that the tendency to stand up and take matters into one's own hands is small.[7] It is this Weberian-like theory that's also cited when speaking about, for example, the Dutch not being big on demonstrations or strikes. It would be interesting to see how the relationship between Protestantism and coups d'état really works and if protestant countries are indeed less likely to suffer coup attempts. A nice subject for further research.

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6 . Edward Luttwak, *Coup d'Etat. A practical Handbook* (1968) 19-20; *Volkskrant*, 'Interview with Susan Stokes about her research on 'democratic erosion'', 21 July 2024; Erica de Bruin, *How to Prevent Coups d''Etat: Counterbalancing and Regime Survival* (2020) 22, 60, 97, 100-102.

7 . Nelleke Bakker, *Kind en karakter. Nederlandse pedagogen over opvoeden in het gezin, 1845-1925* (Amsterdam 1995) 185-186. See also: C. van der Spek, *Sous les Armes. Het Hollandse leger in de Franse tijd 1806-1814* (Amsterdam 2016) 310-312.

Political participation

The third factor for social unrest is the level of political participation. In his groundbreaking book *The Man on Horseback* Samuel Finer attached more importance to this factor – which he calls Political Culture – than to the state of the economy or the composition of the population. Where the level of political culture is highest, Finer says, military interventions in politics are rare and above all unlikely to succeed. In these mostly democratic countries, people have accepted that the government has the moral right to govern, even when one does not agree with its decisions. Amongst the population there is a broad agreement on political procedures like elections, illiteracy levels are low, and a substantial part of the people is socially involved through political parties, churches, unions etc. "In such countries," Finer writes, "the intervention of the military would be regarded as a wholly unwarrantable intrusion. Public sanction for such action would be unobtainable."[8]

According to several democracy indexes (looking at democratic rights and democratic institutions) The Netherlands is one of those countries with a relatively high level of political participation.[9] This tradition of public involvement can be traced back to the times of the Dutch Republic. To the 17th and 18th centuries when The Netherlands was a Federal State in which power wasn't concentrated on a national level, with one king or in one capital city, but instead was spread evenly across the different provinces and cities. Just to be clear, The Dutch Republic wasn't a democracy, far from it, but because of the way the political system of the country worked, a relatively great number of people had some form of influence on the decision-making process and therefore participated in the political culture.[10]

Most studies suggest there is a negative link between democratization and the risk at coups. The more a democracy is established, the less vulnerable a country is to coup attempts. Political scientist Milan Svolik has done the math to prove this point. He calculated that relatively young, so-called transitional democracies – that is, democracies that are still developing – are far more likely to fall back into some form of authoritarianism. The risk of 'reversal' is greatest, he found out, during the first twenty years. After that period, a democracy reaches a phase of 'consolidation', after which the risk of coups almost completely disappears.[11]

If we want to take a closer look at the first two decades of Dutch democracy, we have to go back to the mid-nineteenth century. In 1848, an important year in Dutch history,

8. S.E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback. The role of the military in politics* (1962) 85-90. Also: Luttwak, *Coup d'Etat,* 28.

9. The Economist, *Democracy Index 2023*, Age of Conflict, 9, 17, 36. https://www.v-dem.net

10. Maarten Prak, *Citizens without nations. Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World c. 1000-1789* (Cambridge 2018) 190-192, 203.

11. Milan W. Svolik, 'Which Democracies Will Last? Coups, Incumbent Takeovers, and the Dynamic of Democratic Consolidation', *British Journal of Political Science* 45 (2014) 715-738.

the foundations were laid for the current parliamentary system in the Netherlands. The new constitution accepted that year was a major step for the democratization of the country. It laid down the rules for the democratic process and, more importantly, transferred all executive and legislative powers from the Dutch King to the elected representatives of the people; to parliament. As such, the King was reduced to a far more ceremonial figure.[12]

Of course this liberal transition did not go down well with some conservative sections of society. Unrest brew and political tensions were high, but the situation never ignited, not in the least because it was the King himself that had ordered the new constitution to be drawn up.[13] And that brings us to yet another factor that has to be taken into account and that is the role of certain leading individuals. Apart from the socio-economic circumstances which I have already mentioned, that can increase or decrease the risk of coups d'état, when tensions rise it sometimes comes down to the actions of a few important leaders.

The fact that the Dutch constitution of 1848 was a voluntary transfer of power from king to parliament – albeit under pressure from the more violent revolutions in other European capitals – most certainly influenced the way critics of the new regime reacted to the changes. For years, they complained, grumbled, wrote anti-liberal pamphlets and tried to obstruct the political order, but they never attempted to forcefully remove the new liberal regime.

Although later Dutch monarchs have talked about reversing the liberal constitution of 1848 and worked actively against it, when push came to shove they refrained from violence and abided by the rules of the democratic game. Thereby pre-emptively taking the sting out of any plans the military may have had for intervening.

Military discontent

And that brings us to the second set of circumstances that can lead to coups d'état: military discontent. In his 1986 study of Armies and Revolutions, called *From the Barrel of a Gun*, political scientist Anthony James Joes concludes that the success or failure of a revolution is intimately connected with the actions of the military. It is foolish to assume, he writes, "that once the long-term and middle-term economic and sociological causes of revolution are in place, revolution is practically inevitable".[14] You have to consider the role of the military.

12. Henk te Velde, 'Van grondwet tot grondwet. Oefenen met parlement, partij en schaalvergroting 1848-1917', in: Remieg Aerts et al. ed., *Land van kleine gebaren. Een politieke geschiedenis van Nederland 1780-1990* (Nijmegen 2e druk 2001) 99-178, there 100-108.

13. Jeroen van Zanten, *Koning Willem II, 1792-1849* (Amsterdam 2013) 533-554.

14. Anhony James Joes, *From the barrel of a gun. Armies and Revolutions* (1986) xi.

So which factors push an army towards intervening and which factors hold it back? And can we find certain particularities within the Dutch armed forces that can explain why they refrained from intervening in politics in The Netherlands?

When it comes to military discontent, history gives us multiple reasons for army personnel to be disgruntled. Heavy and disproportionate budget cuts can create a cause for protest. Unfair promotions by favoritism or nepotism can also contribute to the creation of a rebellious atmosphere. In his 1977 book *Soldiers in politics* Eric Nordlinger points at civil-military relations as one of the major factors for unrest. When, for example, a civilian government threatens the military's autonomy or exclusiveness this can generate powerful interventionist motives.[15] Vice versa, after the professionalization of the officer corps not all officers were willing to accept dominance of civilian authorities over military specialists in important matters like strategy or army organization. "The disposition to intervene," Nordlinger states, "is heightened when self-confident, professional officers think they can do a better job at governing than the civilians."[16] A fifth and final reason for mounting frustrations is a lost war or the impending danger of losing one. At those moments the risk of the Armed Forces taking matters into their own hands, is biggest.[17]

When it comes to military discontent, The Netherlands is, of course, no different than other countries. In Dutch history there are a couple of examples of frustrations becoming so high that it led to rumors about officers plotting to overthrow the government.

A first example of this dates back to the 1850s, when the army was severely affected by extreme budget cuts, while in the same time truly worried about the new liberties granted to the Catholic part of the population.[18] A second example was in 1948 when a large part of the officer corps disagreed with the way the Dutch government was handling the Independence War in the Dutch former colony of Indonesia. The Dutch were losing this conflict and several officers started talking about toppling the political parties in power and killing the leader of the Leftist Labour party.[19]

In both cases, however, the plans didn't surpass the stage of pub talk. They were just a couple of angry military men boasting and bluffing and it never led to anything serious. But why was that? Why did the army – or rather small sections of the army, because it's never the whole army that stages a coup[20] – not intervene? International literature gives several reasons why armed forces don't intervene, despite having good reasons to.

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15. Eric A. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in politics. Military coups and governments* (1977) 49. See also: Finer, *The Man on Horseback*, 26-27.

16. Ibidem, 45.

17. Joes, *From the barrel of a gun,* 204.

18. Ben Schoenmaker, *Burgerzin en soldatengeest De relatie tussen volk, leger en vloot 1832-1914* (Amsterdam 2009) 57-58.

19. D. Engelen, *Geschiedenis van de Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst* (1995) 136-137.

20. Singh, *Seizing Power,* 5.

Counterbalancing

For example there could be counterbalancing measures in place. To safeguard themselves from military interventions governments – democratic or authoritarian – sometimes choose to counterbalance the regular military with independent security forces or special presidential guards.[21] The rationale behind this is that the division of military power makes it harder for coup plotters to coordinate their actions and to secure the support of a big enough part of the armed forces. Thus reducing their chances at success.

In The Netherlands there were no serious counterbalancing measures. For instance, there was no separate Royal guard or a powerful police force. But there were, at times, internal divisions within the armed forces that made coup attempts all the more difficult. In the mid-19th century, for example, when dissatisfaction about the new liberal constitution was high, the army lacked the unity necessary to intervene. Although a majority of the officer corps can be labeled as conservative, there always was a rather vocal minority of liberal officers that supported the transition to a more democratic parliamentary system.[22] Potential coup mongers, therefore, had to take into account the possibility of counteractions by their more liberal colleges. This possibility alone was enough to suppress any intervention plans.

Professionalization

The most well-known reason for army officers not to intervene, however, lies within the individual officers themselves. According to Samuel Huntington's famous book *The Soldier and the State*, it is the professionalization of the officer corps that keeps the officer from meddling in politics.[23] The greater the professionalism, the more immersed the officer becomes in his own technical tasks, and the less involved he becomes in any policy issues that do not affect him. Huntington claims that, consequently, the officer corps leaves politics to the politicians.

If this is true, if professionalization indeed somehow restrains the officer corps, it could be an explanation for why Dutch officers never intervened. From the early 19th century they became more and more professional. The Dutch Military Academy was founded, training methods improved, and the importance of tests and examinations grew. It's certainly possible that most army officers were so busy with all the work at hand, that they weren't in the least interested in politics.

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21. Erica de Bruin, *How to Prevent Coups d"Etat: Counterbalancing and Regime Survival* (2020) 131-133.

22. Schoenmaker, *Burgerzin en soldatengeest*, 197, 261, 394-404.

23. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (London 1957) 71, 222-269.

But Huntington's theory isn't uncontroversial. Heavyweights like Finer and Nordlinger have criticized this part of Huntington's book, by arguing that professionalization couldn't be the solution to all problems, because history gives us numerous examples of professional armies rising against legitimate civil governments. They even turn the argument around, claiming that too much professionalization is a bad thing, because it undermines the willingness of officers to accept civil supremacy.[24]

Both Finer and Nordlinger point out that for military professionals to acknowledge and accept the supremacy of civil authorities, they have to have some form of civil ethic, or as Finer calls it, an ethical code. They must have absorbed the principle of civilian supremacy, so that it has become a part of their core values. If this happens the incentive for intervention disappears completely.[25]

This is, according to Finer what has happened in most Western armed forces and also in The Netherlands. Strangely enough neither he nor Nordlinger really clarify how an officer gets such an ethical code. But it's probably a combination of growing up in and getting exposed to democratic values for a longer period of time. Education could also help. It's not without reason that as early as the 19th century students at the Dutch Military Academy were taught *Staatswetenschappen*, or political sciences; learning about the way the government and the political system works.[26] If this immersion into the workings and benefits of democracy lasts long enough, and soldiers and officers gain trust in it, over time alternative scenarios, like coups d'état, will fade into the background and the armed forces will change from being a potential threat to civil government into one of its most staunch guardians.

Conclusion

In search of an answer to the question why The Netherlands doesn't have a tradition of coups d'état, this paper has shown lots of reasons why armies do or do not intervene in politics. While this question seems very simple at first glance, it actually turns out to be a difficult one to answer. There isn't just one reason for the absence of coups, it is a complex interplay of factors: from the economy, a country's demography, historical traditions, the way civil authorities control the armed forces, and the inner values of the officer corps. The outcome of this sum varies from country to country and from time to time. In The Netherlands it was the combination of economic prosperity, ethnic homogeneity, long standing democratic traditions and a well-founded civilian ethic in the officer corps that resulted in a long period of relative political stability, without any interventions by the military.

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24. Finer, *The Man on Horseback*, 24. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics*, 11 en 53.

25. Finer, *The Man on Horseback,* 29-30. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics*, 12-14.

26. Willem Bevaart, *De Gouden Zon. De hogere vorming van officieren der Koninklijke Landmacht, 1868-1992* (Den Haag 1995) 60.

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