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5-2014

The Downfall of the Dutch Republic

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Lombard IL

Grade: 9-10

Genre: Non-fiction

Honorable mention

WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Idris, Maryam, "The Downfall of the Dutch Republic" (2014). *Best Midwestern High School Writing 2014 Winners*. 18.

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hs_writing_2014/18

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The seventeenth century was a difficult time for Europe. Agricultural and industrial issues led to food shortages, which in turn led to higher mortality rates. Conflicts over religion increased, causing the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), which had been one of the most destructive events for central Europe. The war left many countries in turmoil, among which were England, France, Spain, and most of all, Germany. However, the treaty that ended the long war, the Peace of Westphalia, initiated what is known as “the golden age of the Netherlands”, as the treaty recognized the independence of the Republic of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, allowing them to prosper far more than most of their fellow European powers. The Dutch Republic established a constitutional state, and although there were other republics in Europe, the Dutch were the wealthiest, most successful, and most important in international diplomacy and culture. Dutch prosperity was contributed to by achievements in art, science, literature, mathematics, and philosophy. The Dutch were also far more religiously tolerant than other Europeans, which attracted a lot of foreign capital and investment. Their trading business excelled due to their large number of ships, allowing them to establish the Dutch West India Company. They founded colonies in Brazil and the Caribbean, captured the Cape of Good Hope, and the Dutch establishment of the Bank of Amsterdam created an international measure of value for money, leading to Amsterdam becoming the financial center of Europe. Their successes in economy, politics, and scientific and cultural achievements made the Dutch a secure, relatively unified, and highly prosperous republic. However, this peaceful state proved to be temporary, as the Dutch trade business was attracting the attention of England and France. This “attention” led to a time period in which the Dutch had many military conflicts and shifting alliances due to wars with the English and French. Although the Dutch Republic had been flourishing, it now faced struggles with its security, unity, and prosperity, and while the English and French played a heavy role in these struggles, the Dutch’s own actions also had a severe effect on their downfall.

England was the first to realize that the Dutch Republic was quickly becoming a major threat to English trade and economy, and decided that it would be best to attack Dutch trade by sea. This caused the three Anglo-Dutch Wars, which, along with English trade competition from the English East India Company and an alliance between the English and Dutch that proved to be futile, had a grave impact on the security, unity, and prosperity of the Dutch Republic. The Anglo-Dutch Wars were instigated by England's attempts to put a stop to the expanding Dutch trade business, which had been progressing through the Dutch West India Company. Dutch anxiety rose when England issued the Navigation Act, which stated that any goods imported into England and its dependencies had to be transported on English ships, because the Dutch made their business by carrying others' goods. When the English started seizing Dutch ships and expanding its own English East India Company, war broke out. The cause of the Anglo-Dutch Wars is verified by the Marquis de Pomponne, a French ambassador to the Dutch Republic, who claimed that trade competition was the true cause of the wars (Doc. 11). The French ambassador is probably telling the truth, as he is speaking to the French government at this point, so he wouldn't have had a reason to lie when speaking to his own people. The Anglo-Dutch Wars proved to be a significant cause of the Dutch decline. According to the map, "The Dutch Republic and Rival States in the Late-Seventeenth Century", there had been thirteen naval battles between the English and the Dutch (Doc 1). The effects of these naval battles are shown in the chart, "Estimated Losses to Merchant Shipping in the Three Anglo-Dutch Wars" (Doc. 3). According to the chart, the English seized over 2000 Dutch ships, while the Dutch seized only 500 English ships. This had a direct influence on the number of Dutch voyages that took place, as presented by the graph, "Baltic Sea Trade" (Doc. 2). Since the map, chart, and graph are purely statistics and facts, they are completely reliable and unbiased, which means that the amount of Dutch voyages decreased substantially from 1645 to 1695, causing a huge negative impact on Dutch trade and economy. The Anglo-Dutch Wars demonstrate the cunning of the English, as they attacked Dutch trade, which was the most important factor of the Dutch's successful economy, and

accomplished it by seizing the Dutch ships and carrying trade rights, both of which had been crucial to an effective trading business. This reveals how the English caused the deterioration of Dutch prosperity and security. However, once England gained more power over trade, it wanted to destroy the remaining Dutch trade business, even though that meant being “employed” by France. As stated in the Treaty of Dover, 1670, France was willing to pay England a large sum of money in exchange for the two countries attacking the Dutch Republic together (Doc. 6). The treaty conveys the extent to which other countries were prepared to go in order to end the success of the Dutch Republic. A year later, the Amsterdam City Council realizes that other countries besides France also want to take over the Dutch trade business, and even go as far as to ruin the remaining business that they cannot control (Doc. 7). Although this document could be favoring the Dutch and be biased against other countries, since it’s a resolution by Amsterdam’s city council, it could also hold a significant amount of truth, as England would have wanted to ensure that the Dutch didn’t regain their prosperous business by destroying what was left of it. This is supported by the Dutch ambassador to England, who wrote that the English were interested in continuing or encouraging war between the Dutch and the French in a letter to the Dutch government (Doc. 8). This document may be slightly biased, since it’s from a Dutch ambassador to his own government, but if he went to England, he may have seen evidence of the true interests of the English. However, even though the English had been an enemy of the Dutch, they decided to later form an alliance against France, who’d become an increasing threat. Yet, this alliance proved to be futile. According to an Englishman resident in the Dutch Republic, the Dutch armies, despite their alliance with the English, suffered an enormous loss in the war with France (Doc. 14). Since this is stated in a letter, he has no reason to be hiding anything, because he thinks that it’s not going to be read by a lot of people. It implies that the English weren’t much of a help to the Dutch, and is supported by the letter of the Dutch colonial administrator, which states that the declining Dutch trade still faces commercial competition from the English and French, among other countries. Since this was written in 1705, a time

in which the English and Dutch were allies, the Dutch shouldn't have had to worry about competition from the English, and the situation challenged the security, unity, and prosperity of the Dutch. Overall, the role of the English in the Anglo-Dutch Wars, their alliance with the French, and their ineffective alliance with the Dutch all contributed to the decline of the Dutch Republic.

While the English had chosen to attack the Dutch Republic by sea, France decided to attack by land. However, unlike England, which had only wanted to dominate the trading business, France was intent on trade and on taking over the Dutch provinces. The French were a great threat to the Dutch because they had the means of achieving their goals in their high amount of wealth and power. This is indicated by France's payment to England for a collaborated attack on the Dutch Republic. According to the Treaty of Dover, France promised to pay England two million livres, as well as cover all of the expenses needed on land (Doc. 6). According to Konrad Van Beuningen, the Dutch ambassador to England, the war with France could lead to the Dutch lands becoming overwhelmed or flooded, or a permanent place of war, but either way, the Dutch Republic's commerce would be ruined (Doc. 8). The ambassador's letter embodied the fear that the Dutch felt towards the French, as they believed that France had the potential power to basically destroy the Dutch Republic. France's wealth and power combined created an imminent danger to Dutch security and prosperity. The Dutch's dread towards the French also led them to take certain actions that they would never have taken otherwise, including trusting the English. However, Document 14 showed that despite the alliance between the Dutch and the English, the Dutch Republic had no chance against France, and was now horribly suffering because of the war. This letter once again exemplified the immense power of the French. The threat of France also made the Dutch provinces agree to recruit thousands of men to fight the French, even though they didn't have the money for it, as stated in a political pamphlet published in Amsterdam (Doc. 10). This illustrates the effects of war with the French, as the Dutch don't even have enough money now to support their army. The chart titled "National Debt of the Dutch Republic" also portrays the effects of

war, as the debt of the Dutch skyrocketed while fighting France (Doc 12). The severe impacts that the Dutch faced due to war with France threatened their prosperity, security, and now their unity, too, since army recruitment created conflicts in the Dutch Republic. However, even though France was a significant threat on its own, it was not excluded from being a commercial competitor to the Dutch as well. As stated by Document 7, the French king was one of the monarchs who was trying to take over the Dutch trade business, and possibly ruin its remains, although the latter part could have just been a product of bias towards the Dutch Republic, since it was the resolution of the Amsterdam City Council. The Dutch administrator's letter also says that the French were just one of the countries whose commercial competition the Dutch couldn't surpass (Doc. 13). France's vast wealth, power, and ruthlessness in war and trade created challenges to Dutch security, unity, and prosperity.

Both the English and the French played a major role in the decline of the Dutch Republic, but there was one more country that had a huge impact on the downfall – the Dutch themselves. The Dutch Republic had been going through a very difficult time because of the wars and economic competition, but while its debts and losses could be blamed on France and England, its imbalance of wealth and power, trust issues, and political differences could not. These problems that the Dutch created themselves also challenged their security, unity, and prosperity. The Dutch, being a republic, should have divided their power equally among the provinces. However, this was not the case. According to Sir George Downing, the English ambassador to the Dutch Republic, the Dutch government was weak and divided, and Holland had to bear the financial burden of war since the other provinces were poor (Doc. 4). This was written in a letter to the English government, so, like Document 11, it shouldn't show bias because the ambassador wouldn't have any reason to lie to his own government. The letter reveals that the Dutch government has become weak, which would have led to the people facing threats to their security and prosperity. It also implies that Holland holds most of the Dutch Republic's wealth, which would probably also mean that it holds most of the power, too. This led to struggles in Dutch unity, as

the other provinces were now having a harsh time. An anonymous pamphlet published in Holland demonstrated an example of the Dutch people's difficulties (Doc. 5). According to the pamphlet, merchants in the Dutch Republic were being heavily taxed, but shouldn't be, as merchants needed peace, trade, protection, and low taxes, and couldn't be turned into soldiers. This was most likely written by a merchant, so it could be biased towards merchants and therefore not completely reliable. But, high taxes being forced upon merchants in Holland would explain why the province was so wealthy. The Dutch Republic also struggled with conflicts regarding the military. As stated in a Dutch Republic government report, the people disagreed when it came to electing the military commander, and there was also enough mutual distrust among the Dutch provinces that it proved an obstacle when planning how to oppose the French attacks (Doc. 9). This meant that there was a high amount of disunity within the Dutch provinces, as they couldn't even come together at a time of severe crisis. The Dutch provinces' conflicts are further supported by a political pamphlet published in Amsterdam, which claimed that the provinces were all willing to recruit men for the army, but none of them could pay for it except the citizens of Amsterdam (Doc. 10). The pamphlet implies that there was once again an imbalance of wealth and power in the Dutch Republic, except that this time it was centered in Amsterdam instead of Holland. It also suggests that there may have been more disagreement regarding the military. Overall, the Dutch's own imbalances of wealth and power, weak government, and military, political, and economic differences all contributed to their waning security, prosperity, and unity.

In conclusion, the once-thriving Dutch Republic had vastly deteriorated due to the challenges to its security, unity, and prosperity that were caused by England, France, and the Dutch Republic itself. The seventeenth century had been a generally difficult one for most of Europe, as it had been an era of war and conflict over religion and rule. The Dutch Republic had managed to flourish, however, despite the European crisis at the time of the Thirty Years War. Unfortunately for the Dutch, their republic gradually declined. England played its part in the downfall of the Dutch Republic in the Anglo-Dutch

Wars, trade competition through the English East India Company, and an unhelpful alliance with the Dutch. France's attacks to Dutch land, aided by its incredible amount wealth, power, and ruthlessness in war and trade, also had a huge impact. Finally, the Dutch Republic's own imbalances of wealth and power, mistrust, and conflicting ideas on government, economy, and military share the blame as well. However, while the Dutch Republic may have declined because of its internal and external struggles, the next century would prove to be a better one for Europe as a whole, as it was the era of the Enlightenment. People would begin to think about the progress of science and society, and the focus would shift from war and religious conflict to trying to gain a better understanding of the universe.