**Rise to Success: An Analysis on the Dutch East India Company**

// INTRODUCTION

The Dutch East India company was founded in the 17th century and quickly became one of the most influential and powerful trading companies at the time. The VOC (Dutch East India Company) dominated the trade market and developed its commercial trading throughout Europe and Asia. This essay will examine the different factors that contributed to its success such as its military engineering capabilities, ship building prowess and its diplomatic abilities and loyal crew.

// PART 1: BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) (Dutch Cities in Tropical Waters, 12) was a widely successful Dutch shipping company in the 16th and 17th century due to it’s unhindered monopoly over Dutch commerce. In 1595, a sailor by the name of Cornelis de Houtman sailed to Asia and returned in 1597. Although it was not a very profitable voyage, it showed local Dutch investors that the trip was possible and that the Dutch stood a chance to replace Portugal as the principal spice trader to Europe. (Oscar Gelderblum , 4) Return was relatively high on these initial trips and it was easy to get investors. (Oscar Gelderblum, 5) Between 1598 and 1602 there was a multitude of small companies that popped up, capitalizing on the eagerness of investors and the novelty of long-range voyages. All of these smaller corporations were competing for dominance within the Dutch Commercial world, which weakened the Dutch trade as a whole against other European powers. (Oscar Gelderblum, 5) Founded in 1602, the VOC was formed as a political compromise, it was a decentralized company that focused around six chambers, each representing a city, Amsterdam, Zeeland/Middleburg, Hoorn, Enkhuize, Delft and Rotterdam. Each chamber had it’s own board of directors and VOC had a general management consisting of 17 directors known as the *Heren Zeventien* or the Gentlemen of Seventeen. (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 34) The government had granted an official charter, providing the VOC with extensive powers, such as the right to fit ships for trade, make treaties with the rulers of Asia, build fortifications and undertake military operations. (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 35) The VOC was described as a “private corporation with sovereign powers.” (Revisiting the Expansionist Theory) The Dutch government granted VOC monopoly over the Dutch spice trade, which later expanded into textiles from India, coffee from Java and tea from China. (Cracking the Deck) One of the downsides to this extent of power was that after each voyage a submit on the situation out east had to be submitted to the Dutch government. (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 35) This compromise allowed these smaller companies to combine their efforts and make a name for the Dutch within the wider spice trade world. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 16)

After the unity of VOC, more than 50% of the European ships that passed the Cape of Good Hope, a popular trading route, were Dutch. (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 13) The VOC developed colonies from Cape Town, Africa all the way to Dejma, Japan, (Revisiting the Expansionist Theory) and set up a permanent headquarters in Asia in 1619. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 17) To secure their place hold in the Asian spice market, VOC set up a rendezvous point in Batavia on the island of Java in 1619. Batavia became the heart of Dutch trade, where commercial and colonial interests mixed. (Wherever profit leads us, to every sea…) There ships could be resupplied, repaired and the crew could take a break. VOC set up other outposts as well and participated in intra-Asian trading. (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 31) During the 1630’s VOC had visited most trading posts and were steadily growing in power. The VOC “conquered” East Africa, the Indian Ocean and Persia, but special emphasis on Ceylon also known as Sri Lanka for it’s cinnamon and Malabar for its pepper. (Wherever profit leads us, to every sea…) From 1630-1660, VOC’s shipping networking intensified, and they continued to fine-tune their operations. By 1650, eastern Asian was secured and they expanded to western Asia. (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 32)

// PART 2: BACKGROUND ON THE SHIP AND CREW

Like a well-oiled machine, the VOC kept a tight knit crew, which kept things in order and functioning well, enabling their seafaring success. (Agents with Principals) Within the Dutch sea ships there was a rigid hierarchy system. (Agents with Principals – n.p) Each sailor had their set of tasks and people rather above or below them. Within a boat, the lowest rank was a sailor/solider, who was part of a “quarter” which contained seven men. These quarters were the runts of the ship, doing most of the manual labor onboard. Each quarter was managed by a boatswain, (or one of his mates), the quartermaster and three seamen who were knowledgeable on the rigging of the ship. There was then a master-at-arms aboard the ship who oversaw discipline, and maintenance was taken care of by different specialists such as the cooper, the carpenter and the master of weapons. (Agents with Principals – n.p) All of these positions were reinforced by status and clear division between each job. No sailor did a cooper work, and no carpenter did a sailors work. These roles were reinforced by the master-of-arms, who would punish any sailors who stepped out of line. The VOC used their hierarchy system combined with crew loyalty to keep sailors from deserting their posts. Deserters faced harsh punishments if they were caught, such as jail, banishment from the Netherlands and in some cases death. (Agents with Principals) Between the strict roles and the risk of punishment, these factors may not have necessarily created a pleasant work environment, but they did create an efficient ship that could travel long distances and complete it’s task with ease.

// PART 3: SHIPBUILDING EXPERTISE

The Dutch utilized several different technologies when building their ships and were one of the most well-known shipbuilding industries in Europe, this allowed the VOC to take the lead against other competing European powers. When VOC entered the spice trade market in 1602 other European powers such as Spain, Portugal and Britain already had a hold on many spices and trading routes. Therefore, it was important for the Dutch to establish their own trade routes as quickly as possible to catch up. This meant that the VOC needed several fleets of ships that were sturdy, could carry crew, cargo and weapons, and were fitted for the long journey. The Dutch shipbuilding industry utilized technologies like the sawmill, bottom based building and the different ship designs to keep up with the VOCs needs. Since the establishment of VOC, the company employed ships that were explicitly designed for lengthy journeys to Asia and back. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 3)

// SAWMILL

One of the key technological advances that allowed the Dutch shipbuilders to increase production tenfold was the invention of the wind powered sawmill in 1594. Wood production increased by 3000%, the mills were capable of sawing 60 beams in 4 to 5 workdays, instead of the 120 days it took by hand. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 12) This leap in production also helped reduce the cost of shipbuilding because it reduced the amount of manual labour that was needed.

// BOTTOM BASED BUILDING

Another way the Dutch shipbuilding surpassed other industries was bottom based building. This is where a ship is built from the bottom up, which is much more cost efficient and reduces the amount of labour and iron fasteners needed. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 10) A bottom based built ship is assembled in a shell-based method, where planks are held together with temporary wooden cleats until the frame floors and first futtercles are inserted. Then the temporary cleats are removed as the ships framework is installed. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 10) Carvel planking is often combined with bottom based construction, which was just a slight adaptation from the original shipbuilding methods. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 10)

// THE FLUTE

Another massive step for the Dutch was the invention of the Flute ship in 1595. This ship could carry over 200 tons of cargo in 1600, which rose to 360 tons over the seventeenth century. The Dutch could build the Flute for 800 pounds sterling whereas it cost the British 1300 pounds sterling. This was because the center of Dutch shipbuilding took place in the Zaan region where taxes and the cost of land was significantly lower. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 13) The Flute was not only cheap and quick to build, it was also easy to manoeuvre, it took only 7 men and 1 boy to handle it, whereas the regular English merchant ship took 20 men. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 15) The Flute was large enough to hold space for cargoes, crew, food and water plus repair equipment for the ship. They were sturdily built for storms and could last for six or more voyages. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 3)

By 1640, over 1000 ships were built in the Netherlands (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 11) “The Dutch became the foremost shipbuilders in northern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and exported both finished vessels and labor to other countries.” (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 10) These ships contribution to Dutch wealth through the VOC, inspired many artists to paint or draw them. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 4) Dutch ships were considered “seaworthy, capacious, and inexpensive…” (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 11) With the combination of previously established technologies such as bottom based building, carvel planking and the sawmill, the Dutch were able to maximize their shipbuilding efforts. (Dutch East India Company Shipbuilding, 10) Pushing VOC ahead of other European powers in the race for domination over the spice trade.

// PART 4: MILITARY ENGINEERING

After breaking into the spice trade enterprise, it was important for the VOC to keep their position and trade routes through force, this was done through a series of fortifications and military engineering. In the evolution of artillery and arms, the 14th century focused mainly on gunpowder usage whereas the second half of the 15th century was more focused on cast bronze guns and heavy cannons. The limited availability of artillery influenced how fortifications were made, especially when it came to naval fortifications within the spice trade. (The Company fortress, 19) New weapons such as mortars and howitzers significantly effected the fortresses, engineers had to figure out a way to protect their work from being outgunned and breached from afar, while also trying to shield crucial stores, soldiers and weapons from mortars. (The Company fortress, 25)

The VOC commanded a sizeable army throughout the seventeenth century, which was composed of garrison forts that were constantly prepared for battle. (The Company Fortress, 67) The VOC used a system of fortifications to dominate commercial traffic and to ensure the company’s military control over acquired lands. (The Company Fortress, 85) Control was ensured in archipelago areas by setting up fortifications around ‘chokepoints’ in rivers or waterways. This ensured that the VOC had control over the ships coming in and out of said water areas, this also allowed VOC to raise costs on its competitors for items such as cinnamon from Ceylon or pepper from Malabar because they had a monopoly on the supply. (The Company Fortress, 88) Smuggling was still possible, but it was highly dangerous, and the fortifications discouraged it. (The Company Fortress, 89)

“The Dutch colonial fortifications were not simply exports of European designs; they were adaptions to different circumstances.” (The company fortress, 257) 17th century fortification works were pragmatic in design to fortify newly acquired possessions. (The Company fortress, 28) Most military engineers added depth to the walls of their designs to fortify against heavy cannon fire. Designs were often not set in stone as each newly acquired fort or garrison required a different design for it’s specific dimensions, area and common threats. This forced the engineers to be adaptable and pragmatic. (The Company fortress, 28) “… in 1685, the VOC had acquired itself an empire. Apart from being the largest European shipping firm operating on the Cape route, the company operated a large intra-Asian trade and had acquired for itself a position as a territorial power…” (The Company Fortress, 55)

Overall, the adaptability and pragmatism of the Dutch military engineers allowed them to acquire territory and then turn around and defend it through fortifications, which in turn allowed VOC to take hold of different spices on the market and assert their dominance against other European powers.

// PART 5: DIPOMACY AND PRAGMATISM

The VOC displayed an exemplary amount of pragmatism and flexibility that helped it make a name for itself in the international spice trade market. In trying to break into the trade market in the 17th century, VOC had to conform to local expectations and norms to gain permission from locals to trade. (Revisiting the Expansionist Theory) For example, the VOC wanted to trade with the Siam, so the VOC company agents had to partake in the rituals of the Siamese court of Ayutthaya. Many agents did not like this as they say it as a waste of time, but it was vital to retain favor within other cultures to grow their network and trade connections. (Revisiting the Expansionist Theory) “The making of international treaties was often the result of local improvisation.” (Revisiting the Expansionist Theory) Another example of the improvisation and pragmatism of the Dutch is that in foreign courts the VOC would sometimes refer to the ‘King of Holland’, in front of foreign officials who would be offended by their lack of a monarch, and other times would not admit to having a monarch depending on the foreign dignitary. This was especially a sign of their improvisational skills because VOC was not constituted under the Dutch monarch, they were separate from them. (Revisiting the Expansionist Theory) “Dutch officials made a conscious decision to avoid offending the foreign rulers who would see the admission of lacking a ‘King’ as being a sign of living in a state of chaos, lacking customary law or justice.” (Revisiting the Expansionist Theory) Gift giving was also a common practice, and the VOC would regularly give gifts to Asian rulers to “convey messages to both giver, receiver and observers of the exchange.” (Revisiting the Expansionist Theory) The Dutch often gave tapestries or paintings, this helped enhance Dutch prestige.

Another instance of the pragmatism and flexibility of the Dutch was monsoon season. Monsoons often delayed ships for an entire season, but the VOC managed to establish a trading route and time it so that they could avoid the delays of monsoon season. (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 51) “In contrast with the European competitors and many local traders the VOC designed a system of sailing routes that would make them as independent from the monsoon as possible.” (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 170) The Dutch were known for their flexibility which often came from their fast communication. (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 171)

“What has been called the *Hollands Handelsgeest* (Dutch Spirit of Commerce) often used as a mythical explanation for Dutch success, is mainly based of the access to information. The structural way in which this information was exchanged at all levels of the organization and to the far-off corners of the network must have given the VOC an advantage over their competitors.” (Dutch ships in tropical waters, 172)

// CONS

However, despite its monumental successes, the VOC faced significant challenges. Its late entry into the global trading network put it at a disadvantage, requiring it to catch up with competitors like Portugal and Britain. As well “… the VOC suffered from a lack of direction and a clear sense of strategic purpose.” (The Company fortress, 257) These issues, combined with increasing competition in the later 16th and early 17th century contributed to the eventual decline of the VOC. (The Company fortress, 258) In essence, while the VOC’s innovation and adaptability propelled it to become one of the most influential merchant empires of its time, its inability to maintain direction and unity in its later years revealed the vulnerabilities that accompanied such vast power. (The Company fortress, 259)

// CONCLUSION

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) rose to prominence due to a combination of its powerful military engineering, shipbuilding techniques, diplomatic pragmatism, and efficient crew organization. Through its shipbuilding prowess, the VOC utilized technology like the wind-powered sawmill, bottom-based building, and the Flute ship design, to rapidly and cost-effective produce ships. Its formidable fleets allowed the VOC to outpace competitors and sustain long voyages. Additionally, the company's fortifications and military strategies ensured its control over key trading routes, while its diplomatic flexibility, shown in the ability to navigate foreign customs and political expectations, allowed it to gain favor with local rulers and secure trading rights. All of these aspects contributed to the VOC’s remarkable success in establishing and maintaining dominance in the spice trade.

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