

Shifting Frontiers

The Treaty of Utrecht (1713) and its Consequences

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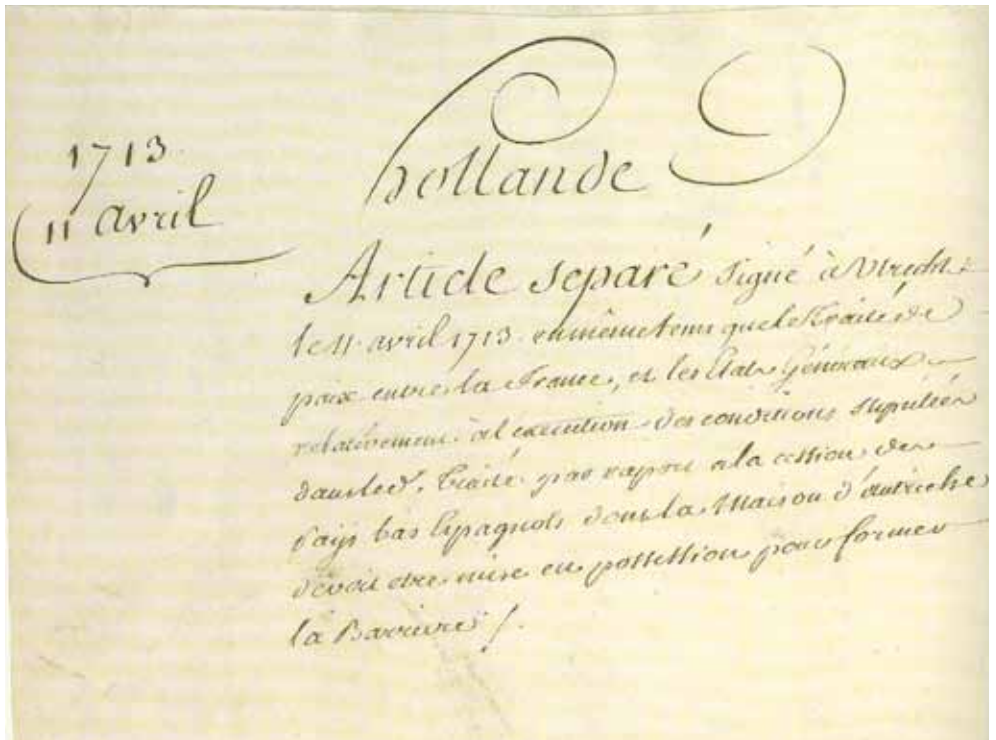
[L U D O M I L I S]

Frontiers are fascinating. They fascinate us because their very existence, their permanence or transience, and their impact are so all-embracing, so fundamental to our lives. They are one of the most important factors in creating social order and regulating social interaction. Within them, forms of solidarity are forged, and beyond them the image of the 'other', the 'foreigner', is created. 'We' as opposed to 'them'. From a national perspective, the route of a frontier is seen as something sacred, rooted in the nature of things. But war is always lurking around the corner. And after war comes the peace which, depending on the balance of power, moves frontiers this way or that in a perpetual merry-go-round of boundaries that are supposed to be perpetual. Wars and treaties therefore have a two-fold impact. On the one hand, they separate territories that once enjoyed a joint existence and, on the other, they bind together regions that once lived apart as strangers. A boundary that is drawn in this way works in two directions: it embraces and binds; it rejects and alienates.

Resolved at last to put an end to the war

The Treaty of Utrecht was one of the pivotal events in the territorial organisation of Europe. By virtue of the frontiers that it dismantled and imposed, it restored order to an international community that had lost its way.

The peace treaty put an end to a long conflict that had been fought out between the leading European states, or rather between their absolute rulers, during the years around 1700. By attaching themselves first to one ally, then another, each attempted to strengthen their international position. The interests of their own families always took precedence and were usually justified as a synonym for the political interests of their territories. France, Portugal, Prussia, and Savoy were the leading actors who, on 11 April 1713, after lengthy negotiations reached a Peace that, significantly, they signed bilaterally, not collectively. Also involved were the United Provinces, the Northern Netherlands, which had wrested sovereignty from their Spanish overlord in 1648. On that same day they signed a treaty with France which not only agreed peace terms, but also dealt with trade and shipping.^[1] Another member of this international



orchestra, in fact emerging as the overall winner, was Great Britain.^[2] In high politics it is not usually admitted that self-interest forms the basis of agreement. So it was claimed that everything had been done for the well-being of their subjects, of those who had suffered fiscal extortion and sacrificed their persons and their property to appease their rulers' thirst for power. The treaty between France and Great Britain expressed it, unconvincingly, as 'consulting as well the advantage of their subjects, as providing (as far as mortals are able to do) for the perpetual tranquillity of the whole Christian world, have resolved at last to put an end to the war, which was unhappily kindled, and has been obstinately carried on above these ten years, being both cruel and destructive, by reason of the frequency of battles, and the effusion of Christian blood. And for promoting this their royal purpose, of their own proper motion, and from that paternal care which they delight to use towards their own subjects, and the public weal of Christendom...'^[3]

Usually the victors in peace negotiations try to capitalize on their victory and force the losers to foot the bill, and the Peace of Utrecht was no exception. Even so it has gone down in history as the first negotiated treaty, because in the closing years of the seventeenth and the early eighteenth century exhaustion and war-weariness were so universal that nobody, except perhaps Great Britain, was able to sound the triumphal trumpet. But peace did not come easily. The ambassadors negotiated for months in Utrecht before reaching agreement. Incidentally, the United Provinces themselves, which in the seventeenth century, their Golden Age, had played such a dominant role on the European and colonial stage, lost that position during this period.

Treaty of Utrecht, 11 April 1713, pen and ink on paper. This addendum concerns the handing over of the Spanish Netherlands to the Austrian dynasty. © Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris

World War avant la lettre



Gerardus Mercator, *Vlaenderen - Exactissima Flandriae Descriptio* (1540), Detail. Canon pointing to France near Cassel (today in France, Département du Nord)

The cause of all those years of uncertainty had been the drawn-out dynastic situation in Spain. When Charles II became King of Spain in 1665 he was a sickly child of four, which was enough to arouse the predatory interest of other princes. Dynasties had always used political marriage as the preferred strategy to control the future. They therefore hunted through their genealogies for family connections which might legitimise a claim to the Spanish inheritance, an inheritance which, apart from Spain itself, also included the Southern Netherlands, parts of northern Italy and an enormous colonial empire as well. Power and prestige, gold and silver beckoned the potential victor. The most imposing ruler of the time was, of course, Louis XIV. France's Sun King had been on the throne for almost 45 years and had developed an unrivalled 'grandeur' that even today is still reflected in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. A people on its knees was a price that did not unduly concern the Bourbons, either Louis or his successors. Louis dreamed of an empire that would unite France and Spain, but it was a dream that could never be shared or accepted by the other members of the club, in particular the Austrian Habsburgs.

Nevertheless, in his will Charles II had named Philip of Anjou, the grandson of Louis XIV, as his successor. So it was inevitable that when Charles died in 1700 the so-called War of Spanish Succession broke out. It turned into a World War 'avant la lettre', fought out across Europe and, of course, on the high seas. Fighting continued for many years, mercenary armies were recruited, talented army engineers were hired and populations were squeezed dry.

Prelude in the Low Countries

In the Netherlands disaster had struck much earlier. The Eighty Years War had broken out in the mid-sixteenth century when the territory rose in revolt against its ruler, the King of Spain. There were various reasons for the conflict. First and foremost, the tradition of extensive provincial autonomy, even at the level of the individual cities, had been systematically undermined by the growing absolutism of the rulers, Charles V and Philip II. Furthermore, the Reformation had successfully taken root in the Low Countries and its autonomy of religious thinking meshed perfectly with the critical self-awareness of a territory that had become rich through trade and industry. But ultimately it was political and, especially, military circumstances that decided the outcome: a disastrous partition. In 1648, when the Peace of Munster was signed and the Eighty Years War, the 'Dutch Revolt', came to an end, the Netherlands were indeed carved up. The North – the United Provinces – became sovereign and independent, while the South remained under Spanish rule. The North became a world power; the South hardly had room to move within Spain's worldwide empire. In the North, the Reformation dominated through a primarily Calvinist Reformed structure. In the South, a strict Catholicism was imposed that reflected the absolutist models of Spain and Rome.

It was a sad time for the Southern Netherlands. Economically it was hard hit by the closing of the Scheldt. Antwerp was no longer 'emporium mundi', the centre of world trade, a position which Amsterdam took over. Furthermore,

France lurked greedily in the wings, as she had done before 1648 under Louis XIII. Absolutism was blossoming and Louis XIV's territorial strategy of 'natural frontiers' was proving successful. Wars and truces succeeded each other but uncertainty remained France's trump card. The Bourbons gnawed away at bits of the Netherlands. The Peace of the Pyrenees (1659), of Aix-la-Chapelle (1668), of Nijmegen (1678) and Rijswijk (1697) recorded these somewhat capricious territorial changes in international treaties. But the last treaty already hinted that some areas might have to be returned to the Southern Netherlands and, although much remained French, Louis XIV was compelled in his final years (he died in 1715) to restore many of his gains. Incidentally, the boundary that was then drawn still corresponds roughly to the present frontier between France and Belgium. So for many decades the Spanish Netherlands was squeezed between France and the United Provinces. Both had their own plans to use the territory as a buffer zone. The administration of the Southern Netherlands combined a weak, incompetent mixture of royal dirigisme from Spain and a modest pursuit of greater autonomy by the royal governors and councils in Brussels. The United Provinces worked closely with Great Britain against French expansion into the Low Countries, even though their other interests on the high seas and in the colonies were often in direct conflict.

Left: The Victories of Philippe V, King of Spain, under the command of Duke of Vendôme. Almanach Royal, 1712.

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Right: The Fall of Douai, taken by Duke of Villars (1713). Almanach Royal, 1713.

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European politics during that period were a confused tangle. So we shall confine ourselves to summarising the events that were important for the Netherlands. In 1691 Maximilian of Bavaria, a pawn of the Austrian dynasty, was appointed Governor General of the Spanish Netherlands. In 1700, as already mentioned, Philip of Anjou, the twelve year old grandson of Louis XIV, became King of Spain. From then on, Louis XIV was effectively in charge of the Spanish Netherlands until Maximilian reappeared in 1704. An Anglo-Batavian coalition subsequently conquered large areas of Flanders and Brabant. Maximilian became 'Sovereign of the Netherlands', which by now was limited to Namur and Luxemburg. All this simply meant that Spain's hold on the Southern Netherlands had been irretrievably lost.

With the Peace of Utrecht, the Spanish, or by now ex-Spanish, territory passed initially and briefly to the United Provinces which, once suitable guarantees had been negotiated, handed it over to the Archduke of Austria. Since 1703, the Archduke had been calling himself King Charles III of Spain, based on the Spanish claims of his father the Emperor Leopold I. From 1711 he would also bear the title of Holy Roman (that is German) Emperor as Charles VI.

The Spanish Netherlands become Austrian

The Peace of Utrecht thoroughly shuffled the global pack of territorial cards. French possessions in North America, more particularly in Canada, passed into British hands. Also important was that the British took over the Spanish monopoly of the slave trade, the *asiento*. Furthermore, Gibraltar and Minorca became British, which enabled the seafaring nation to control access to the Mediterranean. In Italy, Spanish possessions were divided between Savoy and Austria. The former gained Sicily and Milan, and the Kingdom of Naples and Sardinia went to Austria.

On 11 April 1713, by virtue of the treaty, Charles VI became the new ruler of the Southern Netherlands, but it was not until 1716 that the formal terms of the transfer to the Austrian dynasty were agreed with the Dutch and the British. The negotiations led to the so-called Barrier Treaty of 1715, a year after the Treaty of Rastatt was supposed to have confirmed the terms of the Peace of Utrecht.

The Barrier Treaty

From now on Dutch troops would be able to garrison a string of forts and fortified towns along the newly established southern frontier with France at the expense of the Austrian Netherlands.^[4] It would constitute a fortified line facing a similar





The Catholic Netherlands, known by the name of Flanders, divided up by the treaties of Utrecht, Rastatt and Antwerp, by Louis-Charles Desnos (1766) © Cultuurbibliotheek, Bruges (www.cultuurbibliotheek.be) ex. 2007/2916

line which the French had built earlier in the last quarter of the previous century, the so-called *Pré Carré* designed by the military engineer Vauban. Some of these fortifications have recently been restored.^[6]

The Barrier Treaty was not a success for any of the parties involved. The Catholic Austrian Netherlands had to tolerate the celebration of Protestant liturgy in the Dutch garrisons and, even worse, had to foot the bill too. This form of occupation continued for as long as France posed a threat, which it did until 1748. After that the Empress Maria Theresa refused to go on paying for the Dutch garrisons, and, under her successor Joseph II, the Dutch presence came to an end in 1782.

If the importance of historical facts is measured by the length of time their effects are felt, then the Treaty of Utrecht must score highly. The territorial reorganisation and the balance of power which the Great Powers imposed in 1713 remained intact, in spite of many wars, disputes, combinations and alliances, until the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. In the years that ensued, the Revolution would spread its Republican and Napoleonic ideologies throughout Europe, and the collapse of the French Empire would in turn lead to a new order at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Here, the leading role of Great Britain on the world stage became more obvious than ever.

How is a frontier experienced?

The divisions imposed by the Treaty of Utrecht upon the Southern Netherlands in 1713 is a good historical example of the two-way effect that frontiers can have which was touched on earlier. The fact that it is a recurring phenomenon implies that there is some kind of pattern.

We can illustrate this by looking at the state institutions. Once the successive partitions were in place, the central institutions in the Netherlands could not continue to operate across the new boundaries. The areas conquered by France after 1668 ceased to be subject to the Great Council of Mechelen, which functioned as the Supreme Court, but fell under the legal authority of a *conseil souverain* in Tournai, which in 1714 became a parliament, in the sense of a court of appeal, and moved to Douai. Similarly, the Audit Office (*Chambre des comptes*) in Lille, which kept a check on state finances, lost its coordinating authority and, for the Austrian territories, was moved to Brussels. In the territory now belonging to France, *intendants* were appointed. As executive officials they would exercise a huge influence on the systematic assimilation of the new acquisitions into the French system. Supreme authority was naturally exercised by Vienna and Paris respectively.

The ideologies underlying the two administrations were based on different premises. On the French side, absolutism had triumphed, even though in the 18th century it was less coercive than previously. The Austrian Habsburgs, by linking their name to the concept of 'Enlightened Despotism' took an important step forward towards rationalising government policy.

However the new boundaries did not mean that all the structures were dismantled. In 1559, under Philip II of Spain, the episcopal sees in the Netherlands were redrawn. The medieval organisation was done away with and the new structure was intended to reflect the reality of a united Netherlands under the Habsburgs. But because of the independence of the Northern Netherlands and the

French conquests in the 17th century, some dioceses ended up partly or entirely in different countries. The dioceses of Tournai and Ypres, for example, extended on both sides of the border. Although state institutions encouraged estrangement, this was held in check by the cross-boundary structures of the church. Bishops recruited parish priests without taking account of their geographical origins.

We can also take a closer look at the road network. Apart from the old Roman roads, for centuries towns and villages had been connected by little more than paths and tracks. Only in the 17th century was there any large-scale road building, mainly for military purposes. In this the French took the lead and it enabled them to defend their northern frontier very effectively. The Spanish tried to follow their example, but progress was only really made under the Austrian administration. The frontier changes of 1713 meant that the road which went from Lille to Dunkirk via Ypres ran partly through 'enemy' territory. The French hurriedly rectified this by rerouting it via Cassel.^[6]



The Balance of War and Peace, print made by Romeyn de Hooghe (1712). Registration number: 1868,0808.3456 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

A satirical broadside indicating the balance of power between European states during the negotiations leading to the Peace of Utrecht (1712). In the centre a balance, on the left of which are three armed men brandishing swords labelled 'Brit, Batavier en verder Bondgenôte' (British, Batavian and other allies) and "Wighs" (Whigs), the foremost man tramples a torn paper lettered 'Prulliminaria', i.e. the preliminaries of the peace. The balance is held by Justice. In the left-hand, lower pan are emblems of religion and liberty; in the other pan are emblems of war, French monarchy and Roman Catholicism and hypocrisy. Beside Justice are, on the right, true believers and suffering and, on the left, heaven's providence and heaven's wrath, represented by angels wielding a fiery sword, a fulmen and flail.

The traditionally busy communication between the Netherlands and the ceded territories was made more difficult by the mercantilist policies of France. Mercantilism was a centralised system designed to protect the home market and strictly control imports and exports. Not surprisingly it was fiercely resisted by the merchants of Lille and its surroundings who wanted to go on doing business with the Netherlands as they had always done. The corollary to the strict border policy was, of course, a well-developed contraband network with its own tracks, practices and codes. Only when the European frontiers were thrown open twenty years ago did smuggling finally enter the realms of folklore.^[7]

The most striking feature of the 1713 frontiers was the impact on language. Gradually but steadily, because of a whole range of factors, Dutch, which had always

been the native language of what is now French Flanders, was replaced by French. It is a process that is only now, after three centuries, being completed.⁽⁸⁾ The native inhabitants who have clung to their dialect are either dead or at least very old. Education in the mother tongue was banned in the nineteenth century and is rarely, if at all, available. The language, like most minority languages in France, is not passed on to the younger generation. Only in local variants of French do Dutch words and expressions live on, as for instance in the Dunkirk dialect.

The speeding up of communications within national boundaries during the last two centuries has helped to implement the ideal of centralism: compulsory education, military service and the media. Minister Jules Ferry, who during the Third Republic introduced mandatory primary education (in French) in order to raise standards and emphasise and streamline the Frenchness of every citizen, estranged the inhabitants of the French periphery from their traditional native cultures.⁽⁹⁾ It not only applied to the Flemings; it also affected the Basques, the Bretons, the Corsicans and others.

The end of the frontier?

Of course not! It is not the case that 'more Europe' will put an end to frontiers, even if they are now increasingly becoming internal boundaries. The nation states, after all, have nurtured many other traditions: differences in language, loyalty to different capital cities. Education systems teach a different past, and indeed a different present, which at times can be unrecognisable to those who live just over the border. Nevertheless, the frontier is always being breached. Demographic research shows that around 1700 marriage partners were always sought locally and it is striking how the 1713 frontier witnessed a growing trend in cross-border choices.⁽¹⁰⁾ Anyone who nowadays looks at the marriage announcements in De Panne, a resort situated on the French border, will notice how love has made the frontier wafer thin. The boundary posts that here and there are a reminder of how dynasties and empires long confronted each other are now no more than nostalgic witnesses to a distant, ever-changing past.⁽¹¹⁾

The cross-border worker, the creation of contrasting economic realities who in the past used to commute from Belgian Flanders to France, now travels mainly in the opposite direction. This kind of exchange is not only economically important, but socially and sociologically too. Getting to know each other, sometimes in defiance of long-standing prejudices, also means learning to appreciate each other.⁽¹²⁾ ■

NOTES

1. Traitez de Paix et de Commerce, Navigation et Marine entre La France et Les Etats Generaux Des Provinces Unies des Pays-Bas Conclus à Utrecht le 11 Avril 1713.
2. Through the Act of Union of 1707 England and Scotland were united to create the kingdom of Great Britain.
3. G. Chalmers, *A Collection of Treaties between Great Britain and other Powers* (London, 1790), vol. 1, p. 341 (source gallica.bnf.fr) (www.heraldica.org).
4. Since 1697 the United Provinces had been given the international right to garrison a number of forts in the South. In the Treaty of 1715 (and later one in 1717) those on the western flank were limited to Namur, Tournai, Menin, Veurne, Waasten, Ypres, Knocke and Dendermonde.
5. They are part of the 'Network of Small Fortified Towns'. This is a touristic and cultural project about the evolution of fortifications and defensive systems. The project is supported by the EU as part of the Efrro-Interreg II programme. The best restored and touristically the most attractive are those of Grevelingen, Sint-Winoksbergen and Ypres.
6. F. Lentacker, *La frontière franco-belge. Etude géographique des effets d'une frontière internationale sur la vie des relations* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 1973), pp. 65-66.
7. Dany Boon's film, *Rien à déclarer* [Nothing to declare] of 2010 plays on the differences and similarities along such a frontier, the fictitious French Courquain and the Belgian Koorkin.
8. There is a whole bibliography on French Flemish and the debate about its status and its chances of survival. See H. Ryckeboer, *Frans-Vlaams* (Taal in stad en land, 3, Tielt, 2004) and C. Moeyaert, *Woordenboek van het Frans-Vlaams* (Leuven, 2005), and its supplement: *Nieuw oud Vlaams* (Ypres, 2011).
9. At his inauguration as French president, François Hollande paid tribute to the memory of Jules Ferry because of the way his legislation helped to emancipate the ordinary citizen.
10. L. Milis, 'State Boundaries and Ethnic Alienation: Perspectives on Research into the Alienation Processes of French Flemings', in: L. Milis, *Religion, Culture, and Mentalities in the Medieval Low Countries*, (ed. J. Deploige et al., Turnhout, 2005), pp. 369-384.
11. A few examples: a boundary marker from 1779 in Menin, a string of border posts in La Flamengrie near Bavay (1781), a border post on the beach between De Panne and Bray-Dunes from the Dutch period (1819).
12. We have consulted a number of general histories: L. Trenard, ed., *Histoire des Pays-Bas français* (Toulouse, 1972); C. Bruneel, 'De Spaanse en Oostenrijkse Nederlanden (1585-1780)' in: J.C.H. Blom & E. Lamberts, eds., *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden* (Rijswijk 1993), pp. 181-218; L. Bély, *La France moderne 1498-1789*, (Paris, 1994); A. Lottin & Ph. Guignet, *De Charles Quint à la Révolution française (1500-1789)* (Arras, 2006).