
RECONSTRUCTION AND RESTORATION OF SPANISH AND FRENCH
COLOURS IN THE DUTCH ARMY MUSEUM AT LEYDEN ⁽⁺⁾

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Every year at the opening of the new parliamentary session on the third Tuesday, of September, H. M. the Queen of the Netherlands delivers a speech called "De Troonrede" in which she reveals the plans of the different ministerial departments during the new session. The ceremony takes place in the so-called "Ridderzaal", a big hall and centre of the governmental buildings at the Hague.

Three hundred years ago this hall made a far more beautiful and colorful impression than now. Trophies of wars, conquered on land and sea, hung down from the walls and the ceiling. One hundred and fifty Spanish infantry and cavalry colours and some beautiful silver trumpets, all originating from the battles of Turnhout (1597) and Nieuwport (1600) together with dozens of big naval flags from Spanish, English and Swedish men-of-war, won during merciless and bloody sea battles, formed a dazzling collection as is proved by pictures of those early times.

Two hundred years ago a number of these trophies - made of silk or wool - had already fallen to pieces, with only the sticks protruding from the walls. But hundreds of French infantry and cavalry colours and a dozen pairs of kettle drums originating from the Spanish War of Succession and conquered during big and fierce contests like those of Oudenaerde (1704), Ramillies (1706) and Malplaquet (1709), joined the collection in the "Ridderzaal". At the end of that same century a number of very big Malayan trophies originating from colonial wars (1784) gave an Oriental look to the already faded ensemble.

Three Russian infantry colours strengthened again the dying colours. They were conquered in 1799 during the invasion of North-Holland by English and Russian troops, together with four other colours, by French troops. However, an agreement with the Dutch resulted in the sending back of the three colours mentioned before. They were also hung in the "Ridderzaal", though they were not trophies at all.

⁺ See "Nederlands Trofeeën uit drie oorlogen" by J. G. Kerkhoven, in ARMAMEN-TARIA, Aflevering II, Zomer 1967, Publikatie van de Stichting Het Nederlands Leger- en Wapenmuseum "Generaal Hoefe", Musea te Leyden en Delft, pages 8-53 (with illustrations).

In 1806 Louis Bonaparte, King of Holland, removed all these trophies and sent them to Amsterdam, which town he preferred as a new capital. With military pomp and thundering speeches they were paraded through the streets of Amsterdam and afterwards hung in the "Hall of the Citizens", the so-called "Burgerzaal" of the Amsterdam townhall. This building became a royal palace the next year (1807).

During this quite unnecessary transfer all the trumpets, kettle drums and identification plates disappeared, never to be found again.

A big number of trophies from colonial wars in Java (1825 - 1830) and in Atjeh (Sumatra, 1871 - 1901) strengthened again the deteriorating collection.

When, about a century ago, the first inventory was made of the existing trophies, it was found that already hundreds of them were lost. The use of big stoves and the regular cleaning-up of the rooms were fatal to the old silk. Quickly the deteriorating progressed. Big pieces which fluttered down were laid in a wooden chest, small pieces were swept away.

In 1929 the late General Hoefer, director and founder of the Dutch Army Museum, after a visit to the trophies in the Royal Palace at Amsterdam started action to save the remnants from destruction and neglect. The personnel of the Palace however had done its best to keep the collection together and because the general did not use the best arguments his action had no result at all.

After the Second World War, when new methods for conservation of old textiles were developed in Delft at the Technical Academy, the whole collection in 1960 was placed at the disposal of the Ministry of Defence by H. M. Queen Juliana.

These methods - i. e. heatsealing with buttyral and using artificial textiles as a supporting base - were practised by the Workshop for Restoration of Old Textiles in Haarlem, while restoring the French white-crossed trophies. All these were ready in 1965. The work could be done in due order, because the documentation about these colours was reliable and rather extensive.

Far more difficulties were met during the assembling of documentation and the resulting reconstruction of the Spanish colours. Extensive studies and comparison of all available pictures of the 16th and 17th centuries from Holland, Belgium, France, Spain and Germany with existing Spanish colours of the 17th century in Stockholm and Switzerland gave a better starting point. The already impregnated remnants - so dried-out and faded that they looked like tobacco - with their knotted and twisted shreds produced endless troubles before they slowly could be separated, measured and drawn. Comparison of the dozens of pieces formed many

jig-saw puzzles lasting months together. Six infantry colours, in Spanish called "banderas", could be reconstructed at last. They were far bigger than the French ones (ca. 1700): Compare the 3.80 m square of the Spanish trophies with the 2.10 square of the French ones! The Spanish infantry colours had all sorts of variation in their ornaments such as flames; circles, meanders; diamonds and rosettes. The only presently existing Russian trophy (1799) proved to be the best of the Dutch collection. It is far smaller than the French colours of a century earlier. Compare the Russian 1.20 m square with the French 2.20! The colour shows the double-headed Russian eagle bearing the heraldic coat of arms of Moscow on its breast.

When in the near future the original "Pesthuys" of 1658 is restored and renewed like the "new" building of 1874 - together forming the Army Museum - all these trophies which are now hanging temporarily in Leyden and Delft will be shown with extensive illustrations and well-directed spotlights. Then the collection will form one of the most interesting parts in the display at the Army Museum. As documents and memories of a glorious past they have stories to tell of honour and defeat, but alas! also of death and dying of European soldiers of many nations. . .
