Dutch Golden Age: Crash Course European History #15

Crash Course: European History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=35PinDPNPw0
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/35PinDPNPw0

Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So in the last episode, we saw the gentry and merchant class of the British Isles defeat the old aristocrat-backed, absolutist monarchy in the Glorious Revolution, ushering in a constitutional government. And this points to a wider development in European history--and for that matter world history.

So, we've talked a lot in this series about being able to shift perspectives--to see things from royal perspectives, or from peasant perspectives, and so on. But students of history must also learn how to shift the lenses through which they look at the past. Like, we might look at the past through the lens of food availability, or through the lens of visual art, or through the lens of Marxist theory, and so on.

And the lenses we choose are often about our present concerns. The way that we look at the past changes over time, as the present changes. And in the present where I'm currently standing, one of the big questions is how to distribute power among humans.

So today, we're going to look at history through the lens of power--by which I mean, who gets to decide the ambitions and priorities of a community, and we'll see how the distribution of that power can change over time.

INTRO

So, in the early modern period monarchs could coordinate national defense, and they could try to collect taxes and even try to impose their religious beliefs on their communities. But increasingly over time, economic activity was driven and controlled by the so-called productive classes--land-owning gentry who were producing more food per acre thanks to the agricultural revolution, and merchants who were making money due to expanding trade and imperialism.

These classes held the key to government finances, because they were the ones with the money and land and goods that could be taxed, which then--as now--meant that they had power to sway governments. And in many cases, these productive classes used this power to give themselves a say in the running of their country through advocating for a constitutional government that could keep the monarchy in check. We see this especially in Dutch history, where these classes brought about constitutionalism and created what has come to be known as the Dutch Golden Age.

It'll last forever: just like all golden ages. So, like British reformers, the Dutch had an active business class, who were backing the struggle for independence from Spain. This struggle involved the seven northern provinces of the Low Countries allying with the ten southern provinces after 1576 to defeat the Spanish in the Eighty Years War (also known as the Dutch revolts or the Dutch War of Independence or I suppose the Spanish probably thought of it as Our Northern Province's Illegal War of Secession.

It all depends on who's telling the story. But anyway, by the end of the sixteenth century the United Provinces of the low countries had become functionally independent from Spain, though it wasn't formalized until 1648 in the Treaty of Westphalia. The southern provinces spun off to constitute Belgium, Luxembourg, and parts of northern France, while the seven northern provinces became the Netherlands.

Each province of the Dutch Republic had a regent who oversaw provincial affairs, while as a group they participated in the States General, a kind of council of representatives from each province, which in turn chose a single executive, known as the stadtholder, or stadtholder. Or probably somewhere halfway in between those that only Dutch people can say. We'll say Stadtholder.

Anyway, all in all, this was a fairly loose confederation of states, and they often had competing interests. Like, Holland, on the one hand, was the most prosperous and contributed the most to the overall finances of the group. It was commercially-oriented and generally favored peace over war.

On the other side were provinces like Zeeland whose privateers seized ships during the chaos of warfare and were therefore somewhat less opposed to it. Calvinist clergymen favored war against Catholic Spain and some pamphleteers simply liked war because "it caused all industry and trade to grow and prosper."[1] Which is a bit of an oversimplification. Although, whether war is good for business is one of the big questions of history.

It's definitely not great for people, though, which I would argue are possibly even more important than businesses? There was also disagreement among the provinces about the role of the stadtholder: Should the Stadtholder become more of a monarchical figure, or should the United Provinces continue to function as a kind of republic? So we're talking here about big differences about fundamental matters, like war and peace and how power should be distributed within the confederation.

And these differences prevented the kind of focused central government that England built after its Glorious Revolution. But nonetheless, the States General had greater unity in economic policy—that is in its strategy for backing trade—than the English did, whose conservative aristocracy were always battling the commercial classes both before and after the English civil war. So despite a measure of political disunity, the Dutch Republic prospered in the seventeenth century and in spite of warfare, it actually became a comparatively tolerant state.

In fact its prosperity made it a kind of mecca for all sorts of artisans and business people who wanted to participate in Dutch hustle and bustle. [[TV: BARUCH SPINOZA]] The republic became a center of printing for people whose thoughts had been censored elsewhere. For instance, philosopher Baruch Spinoza denied the immortality of the soul and didn't believe in a transcendent deity. Those were pretty radical ideas in 17th century Europe, and in fact, Spinoza was banished from his Jewish congregation in his early twenties, but he continued his philosophical labors, and he was able to continue publishing.

It's also worth noting that, like most philosophers, Spinoza did have a day job--he ground lenses for microscopes and telescopes. Meaning that he was very good at shifting historical lenses. I feel like I should apologize to my friends and family for that joke. Except. That I'm not sorry. But Spinoza's Portuguese Jewish ancestors had settled in Amsterdam in the sixteenth century, and Jewish people from Spain also migrated north to escape persecution by Isabella and Ferdinand and their royal descendants.

Pilgrims and many other religious non-conformists also went to the Netherlands, as did many Huguenots after the French revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The citizens of the Dutch Republic were among the most diverse in Europe at the time, and that contributed to the Netherlands prosperity. So thriving businesses arose at the time, especially ones deriving from the early maritime networks its merchants had developed in Japan, Southeast Asia, and the New World late in the sixteenth century.

Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge was one person who saw overseas trade as key to advancing overall Dutch prosperity. Along with other military men and adventurers, embarked on securing the spice trade for the Netherlands This largely involved expanding trade networks with present day Indonesia. Matelieff de Jonge wrote a book called Discourse on the State and Trade of the Indies that described the Indonesian islands and the broader southern oceanic

region, and the Dutch government took notice of the riches promised by the spice trade, so they authorized the creation of trading companies whose military forces didn't just take territory, but also sought to advance trade, at times acquiring goods or establishing trade routes via force or the threat of it.

These Indian Ocean trade networks were highly developed, and Europeans were new to them, and relatively inexperienced. Especially the Dutch. The Spanish and Portuguese had been at it for more than a century. And so despite armed trading companies, gaining the upper hand in trade took the Dutch generations, although they would use alliances with local leaders and military might to become imperialist powers in time, and eventually extract far more than they invested in the well-being of colonies.

But before all that, Holland's merchants began bringing back an array of plants and commodities, which stimulated innovation, while its geographic positioning enabled its ships to access north-south and east-west trade routes. And as English merchants and leaders became wrapped up in decades of political disputes and lethal combat among themselves, the Dutch began to outperform them in trade.

Soon the Dutch had replaced the Portuguese as the primary Atlantic slave traders, although the English would eventually overtake them. But by the middle of the 17th Century, the center of economic activity in Europe had migrated from the Mediterranean and Italian city-states, north. The Dutch were thriving.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble. The Dutch took advantage of their independence and reduced war expenses by one, expanding their shipping capacity and two, building a network of canals connecting 400 miles of major cities which improved communication and trade regionally. Amsterdam flourished, growing to over 200,000 people by late in the century, and as it grew, land reclamation and civil engineering advanced, along with the now-famous design of Amsterdam's houses, many of which are still standing. In fact, I lived in a 17th century Dutch home while writing *The Fault in Our Stars*.

But speaking of innovation, Dutch painter and inventor Jan Van der Heyden devised a long-burning wick, which brought cities nighttime illumination and a reduction in crime. He also created portable pumping devices to extinguish fires, which drastically reduced the destructive power of urban fires beginning in the seventeenth century. Meanwhile Dutch artists, including Van der Heyden, excelled in painting some relatively new portrait subjects: common people, and their everyday lives and domestic interiors, and the commodities that increasingly filled their homes. Many of these commodities came from distant lands and included Chinese porcelain, Middle Eastern carpets, and imported textiles.

In addition, the paintings of Johannes Vermeer, alongside those of Van der Heyden, featured maps and globes, testifying to the cosmopolitanism of the middle and upper classes. But even ordinary workers in Dutch cities might have a painting and books for intellectual and visual nourishment, which was a stark contrast from just a century or two earlier. Thanks Thought Bubble.

So with the Dutch now commanding trade in a way that the English could not, Oliver Cromwell's government sought to take back control of the seas with the Navigation Act of 1651. It mandated the use of English ships for any goods using English ports, whether in Britain itself or in its colonies. This was one example of legislated mercantilism.

Now, we've mentioned this before, but mercantilist theory sees the global economy as finite. We now understand that the size of the global economy's overall pie can get bigger and smaller, but at the time Mercantilist theory saw the overall economy as stagnant, which meant to become wealthier, you had to take wealth from other places. Tarriffs for instance, were a common feature of mercantilism--with a finite economic pie, a nation should only export goods and take in gold for them; it should never buy foreign goods because that would mean losing wealth to a competing nation.

Now, this obviously happened most dramatically in colonized regions, but it also happened within Europe, as nations sought to take wealth and possessions from one another. Three separate times between 1652 and 1674, the English provoked warfare with the Dutch in order to gain an upper-hand in trade. For the most part, the Dutch prevailed in the first two of these wars, even getting some relaxation in the Navigation Acts as part of peacemaking. But one exception was the Treaty of Breda that ended the war of 1665-67, when the English gained permanent control of New Amsterdam (now known as New York). This effectively knocked the Dutch Republic out of what would become the lucrative North American sphere of trade and settlement, and also indirectly led to They Might Be Giants' third best song.

But the third of these wars from 1672-74 concerned politics more than mercantilist issues. It aroused high passions over enhancing the role of the stadtholder and bringing William of Orange to become perhaps stadtholder for life. If you're wondering why the Dutch soccer team wears orange, by the way, that's why. In 1672 an angry mob, believing that William's rise was being prevented by brothers and high officials Johan de Witt and Cornelis de Witt proceeded to lynch, flay, and cannibalize those brothers. The fight over how concentrated power should be, and who should have that power, clearly wasn't over.

So even as it continued to prosper, the Dutch Republic was profoundly politically divided by the end of the 17th century. Meanwhile, Great Britain, its rival on the seas, had more or less resolved its political questions and created the ground rules for an effective monarchy and its relationship with the commercial classes. and that meant the Dutch Golden Age receded. As golden ages always do. England meanwhile, was rising again--although only temporarily. Next time we'll see how eastern Europe was faring during the seventeenth century. Thanks for watching; I'll see you then.

_____

[1] Quoted in Geoffrey Parker, Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 237.