

# NEGOTIATIONS ABOUT DUNKIRK

Godefroi (1607–1686), Comte d'Estrades, French Ambassador in the Netherlands (1663–1668)

to Louis XIV (1638–1715), King of France (1643–1715)

*The Spanish controlled Dunkirk, an English-Channel port, from 1496 until 1658, when the French captured the city after a long siege and turned it over to their English allies. King Charles II of England sold Dunkirk to France in October 1662, prompting concerns in the Netherlands that the city, in which Louis XIV charged no import duties, would compete with Dutch trade.*

18 January 1663

I am to give Your Majesty an account of two visits which were made me this day, and which I believe was done in concert—one at nine o'clock in the morning by the Pensionary;<sup>1</sup> the other at three in the afternoon by Monsieur Van Bueningen,<sup>2</sup> who was ambassador in France.

The former began the conversation very artfully with the most respectful and obliging expressions towards Your Majesty, and enlarged on your power, on the great qualities you enjoy, and that, in short, one might suppose a great soul was not without a great ambition; that it might also be hoped neighbors and allies might aggrandize themselves by the means your royal goodness might put into their hands; that they hoped to have it shortly in their commerce, the only support of their state, though the freedom Your Majesty had given Dunkirk caused great alarms in the provinces of Holland and Zealand.

But considering also the little advantage Your Majesty would receive by it, and how much it would lessen the revenues of France by taking off the duties on goods in the frontier towns of Flanders, he could not think Your Majesty would leave the certain for the uncertain; and that he must own to me the States would be very much obliged to Your Majesty if you would retrench that freedom, which is so great the like was never known.

I replied I was not surprized to hear him talk of Your Majesty as he had done; that I doubted not he did it with pleasure, because I had observed in several conferences I had had with him he was very well-informed of Your Majesty's great qualities, but that I was willing to explain them a little more particularly to him; that I agreed with him as to Your Majesty's great power, your great soul, and great ambition. But it was also proper he should know to what use you put all those great qualities. As for your power, you never thought of making any other use of it but to maintain a union and good amity with your allies, as he might know by the orders I had received to act with reference to the States. And as for your great soul and great ambition, both of them were only employed to keep what was your own, and you desired nothing unjust of anyone whatsoever, but also would not suffer anything which is Your Majesty's due to be in any wise altered.

As to the freedom Your Majesty has given Dunkirk, Your Majesty had no view of its being prejudicial to the States, who may do the same all over their provinces. Neither did you consider your own interest, because by it your revenues are diminished; only in acknowledgement of the affection the inhabitants have on several occasions shown for Your Majesty, and to let the people of Flanders see that if they were some years past oppressed by the governors of the places under your government, Your Majesty was now at the head of your affairs and would establish so good order that not only they should see you desired they should live in peace, but also that everyone should gain by the liberty of trade. And for this reason Your Majesty parted with your revenues with joy, to increase those of a people who had been afflicted in your minority, and at a time when you could not help them. Upon which I desired him to take notice of Your Majesty's depriving yourself of the most clear branches of your revenue that your neighbors might hereafter receive the benefit of it and Your Majesty give them marks of your royal bounty and liberality. He saw plainly by my answer he had not gained anything upon me.

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<sup>1</sup> Johan de Witt (1625–1672), Grand Pensionary of Holland (1653–1672)

<sup>2</sup> Conrad van Beuningen (1622–1693), Dutch diplomatic representative in Sweden, Denmark, France, and England (1652–1662)

Monsieur van Beuningen's discourse was to the same effect, but not told with the same address. I answered him to the same purpose as I had done the Pensionary, by endeavoring to give him to understand Your Majesty's design was to maintain peace and union with all the world, but also to defend your rights if they were attacked.

I thought it best to carry myself thus to these men because of certain information I have had of cabals forming in the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and in Zealand against the freedom of Dunkirk. I have been told they have sent deputies to the States-General to declare to them that the greatest part of workmen in manufactures who have come into Holland within these twenty years would now return to Ghent and Bruges to work for and trade to Dunkirk, [and] that the best merchants in the above-mentioned places have declared if this freedom goes on, they will send factors to Dunkirk and follow after with their families.

Zealand is under the same apprehensions for the sugars, tobacco, and indigo which come from the isles of Saint Christopher, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, the trade of which has enriched several families notwithstanding the great duties they pay in Zealand, so that the most clear-sighted see plainly Dunkirk will in four years' time draw all the trade and ruin this country.

I have also been informed men have been sent privately to Ghent and Bruges to endeavor to dissuade the magistrates from having any trade with Dunkirk, and even that the duties in Zealand have been offered to be lessened. It has been told them there's no safety in settling in a garrisoned town, and they had better continue their trade with the old friends than begin a correspondence with new. All I have said has been intimated to me by my intelligence in Bruges and Ghent, and I perceived by these gentlemen's discourse they visited me only to sift me on this freedom, which I find touches them very nearly.

Your Majesty will do me the honor to write me if you are pleased to approve of the answer I gave them, and if you would have me speak more boldly to them in case they talk to me of it again.

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Louis XIV (1638–1715), King of France (1643–1715)

to Godefroi (1607–1686), Comte d'Estrades, French Ambassador in the Netherlands (1663–1668)

26 January 1663

...As to what relates to the freedom of Dunkirk, which the Pensionary of Holland and the Sieur van Beuningen talked to you of, you may tell both the one and the other that I was surprised to find they were alarmed so much at a thing which so little deserves it that I had not hitherto made the least reflection on an augmentation of trade, which they both seemed to apprehend so much in their discourse with you. And to say truth, as I had never any thought of it, I know better than they it would be in vain to think of it now or at any time hereafter, the nature of the French not being so adapted as to apply themselves to traffic, whatever care I should take to put them upon it.

Besides, the port of Dunkirk is not fit of itself to create envy in them or foreigners, being a place of war, where the fortifications and a numerous garrison are not very compatible with the entire liberty and safety which merchants desire. Further, the port being very bad and the entrance very difficult and dangerous because of the sands, none of the conveniences which might contribute to the facility and augmentation of trade are there to be met with.

We have seen what a progress the Spaniards made in it when they were masters of the place and endeavored to settle it there. For, excepting their piracies on my subjects in time of war, the cause and terror of which cease in peace with respect to all the neighboring states, what was there done by them in augmenting commerce in this port?

My only aim in not settling an office for duties on goods at Dunkirk was that I might not treat my new subjects there worse than those of my other conquests, which I have not burdened with impositions that are levied only in the ancient limits of my Kingdom. I never set up offices for customs in the cities of Hainaut, in those of

Luxembourg, in Roussillon, Alsace, or Pignerol; nay, there's none at Gravelines.<sup>1</sup> Why then should I settle one at Dunkirk, which for many reasons I should treat more mildly to regain the affections and hearts of the inhabitants, who might justly enough complain of my giving them, after I had conquered them, to a power whose domination could not be very agreeable to them.

By all that's above-said, those who have the direction of the state will judge if they have any occasion to conceive jealousies of the freedom of Dunkirk, as they seem to have done by what they said to you, the cause of it being quite different from what they thought it was and they will in time perceive it will do them no more damage than that of Phillipeville or Mariembourg,<sup>2</sup> where there's no trade at all....

I think I have already told you in your instructions that I should take everything to be well laid out that was expended for my gaining the Pensionary of Holland entirely, and I have not altered my opinion. But this must be managed with dexterity, because, as he has been painted to me, he's a man who values himself on his virtue, and would be proud of refusing any such proposals. However, this inconvenience is not so great but I believe you may easily drop in discourse with him that I should rejoice at an opportunity to give him effectual proofs of my benevolence, if he was disposed to receive them. This step may help to show him the sincerity of my affection and my esteem of his merit and good qualities.

*Letters and Negotiations of the Count d'Estrades* (London: D. Browne, 1711), I:10–13, 16–17, 18.

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1659 Peace of the Pyrenees, France received the territories of Roussillon in the south, Pignerol in the southeast, and Alsace, Gravelines, and parts of Hainaut and Luxembourg in the east.

<sup>2</sup> Louis XIV received the Walloon towns of Phillipeville and Mariembourg in the 1659 Peace of the Pyrenees.