

The Impossible Dream. France and the Austrian Netherlands During the Régence (1715-1723)

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Introduction

The regency of the duc d'Orléans is generally considered a period of relative calm in the French ancien régime. The contest of arms over the Spanish succession, which had spanned Europe and dragged on for more than a decade, ended in 1713-14 after Philip of Anjou agreed to renounce his rights to the French throne, thus preventing a potentially destabilizing dynastic union of France and Spain. The country gained time to both stabilize its internal political and economic situation, and to normalize its strained international relations¹. The latter aspect implied a detente with the House of Habsburg, and - above all - the renunciation of France's expansionism, which had peaked under Louis XIV and had largely been to the detriment of the Habsburg Netherlands². After a half century in which the Sun King's armies repeatedly crossed France's northern border, the installation of the regent appeared to signal an end to the country's expansionist ambitions with regard to the Southern Low Countries.

¹ Lucien BÉLY, *Les relations internationales en Europe, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles*, Paris, 2007⁴, p. 447.

² Hervé HASQUIN, *Louis XIV face à l'Europe du Nord: l'absolutisme vaincu par les libertés*, Brussels, 2005, passim.

The international positioning of *la Régence*, and particularly France's policy in relation to the Southern - and since 1713 Austrian – Netherlands, seems to constitute a firm break with that of previous decades. This apparent discontinuity raises many questions, such as what exactly caused France's reorientation and who was responsible for it, and yet the scientific literature does not provide satisfactory answers. Despite the Bourbons's historical interest in the region, a thorough, long-term analysis of French policy in relation to the Habsburg Netherlands is still lacking. Lucien Bély's overview article of 2013 provided the impetus for this research. In it, Bély states that post-Louis XIV France generally behaved as a territorially saturated power – “comme si les revendications anciennes de la France sur l'Artois et la Flandre ayant été satisfaites”³. Because it was protected by a well-defended *pré carré*, France no longer considered expansion to the north a necessity, and thus consciously renounced its earlier ambitions⁴. However, "post-Louis XIV" meant the government of Louis XV, and the political intermezzo of the regency is hardly mentioned in the article. Rather, it is implicitly assumed that changes under Louis XV had already gained momentum during *la Régence*.

³ Lucien BÉLY, *L'art de la paix en Europe. Naissance de la diplomatie moderne, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, 2007, p. 210.

⁴ Lucien BÉLY, "Le royaume de France et les Pays-Bas à l'époque moderne," in Claude DE MOREAU DE GERBEHAYE, Sébastien DUBOIS and Jean-Marie YANTE, eds., *Gouvernance et administration dans les Provinces Beligues (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles). Ouvrage publié en hommage au professeur Claude Bruneel*, Brussels, 2013, p. 645. A similar line of argumentation was employed earlier by Michel Antoine and Jean-Pierre Bois. See Michel ANTOINE, *Louis XV*, Paris, 1989, p. 401; Jean-Pierre BOIS, *Fontenoy 1745: Louis XV, arbitre de l'Europe*, Paris, 1996, p. 129-33.

This thesis - that French territorial ambitions in the Netherlands disappeared in the wake of what is interpreted as a peaceful turn in the country's general foreign policy - also fits within the historiographical discourse of some influential legal historians on emerging ideas regarding a European balance of power following the Peace of Utrecht. For example, authors such as Randall Lesaffer and Frederik Dhondt state that the eighteenth century was a breeding ground for politicians and theorists who emphasized the importance of establishing political equilibrium in Europe. As Lesaffer has demonstrated, this principle was included both explicitly and implicitly in the various treaty texts formulated in April and July 1713. Additionally, Dhondt argues that France and England, Europe's premier diplomatic mediators following Utrecht, engaged in political actions that increasingly corresponded with the normative principle of maintaining a balance of power⁵. Others, like James Sofka, contend that this quest for equilibrium was not much more than a myth, and that governments and rulers remained expansionist and hegemonic; the difference was that they now simply lacked the means to realize their ambitions⁶.

⁵ Randall LESAFFER, *The Peace of Utrecht, the Balance of Power and the Law of Nations*, Tilburg Law School Legal Studies Research Paper Series 05/2014, in https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2384467, passim (consultation date 4 February 2020); Frederik DHONDT, *Balance of power and norm hierarchy: Franco-British diplomacy after the Peace of Utrecht*, Leiden-Boston, 2015, p. 344-70.

⁶ James R. SOFKA, "The eighteenth century international system", in *Review of International Studies*, 27, 2001, p. 148-49.

Did emergent theories about a European balance of power effectively lead to this peaceful period in the otherwise conflict-ridden ancien régime? Was the cautious foreign policy of *la Régence* a sincere expression of peaceful intent? Or was France's position actually a result of pragmatic self-restraint? After all, the government in Paris was well aware that any attempt at territorial expansion would inevitably lead to a military response from an extensive anti-French coalition. The whys and wherefores of this new direction in French foreign policy require examination in relation to the latter perspective - especially when we take into account later developments such as French intervention in the Habsburg Netherlands during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) or the plans drafted in 1756 to pass the territory on to the duke of Parma, Louis XV's son-in-law, via an exchange. Not to mention the outright annexation of the Austrian Netherlands by France at the end of the eighteenth century. It must therefore be asked whether 1714 France really was "une nation satisfaite"? The position taken during *la Régence* must be analysed against the backdrop of both circumstance and other ideas that may have been either prevalent or circulating on the margins of French political circles; in other words, the opinions, options, and alternatives mooted that may not have been consistent with either the official discourse of peace or with the realities of French foreign policy.

This question forms the starting point of an analysis of French priorities and motives concerning the Austrian Netherlands between 1715 and 1723. In this article, we will examine the policies carried out in relation to the Southern Netherlands, and at the same time analyse to what extent this was in accordance with the wishes and ambitions expressed in French government circles. Was there a hunger in Paris, contrary to the official discourse, for

territorial expansion to the north - "la réalisation d'un rêve impossible"⁷ - or was that simply, once and for all, no longer the order of the day? And how was France's attitude perceived in the Austrian Netherlands? Were people there convinced that the apparent rapprochement was sincere, or were there still concerns about an invasion? Was this uniform throughout the population, or were there factions with differing views regarding a possible French annexation?

For this analysis, we have used the *Correspondance politique, Pays-Bas Espagnols et Autrichiens*⁸, which is a compilation of exchanges between the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its diplomats and agents active abroad - in this case, in the Austrian Netherlands. However, the collection contains much more than the directives and regular communiques between Brussels and Paris. It also includes the continually generated memoranda and policy reflection papers, which reveal the range of ideas circulating in French diplomatic circles. These sources offer us an insight into the other options and alternative or additional goals that were being discussed in Paris.

This analysis and its conclusions will fill in a major lacuna in the literature because it will enable us to better evaluate the regency of Philip d'Orléans, who was long considered a weaker ruler than his predecessors. This less than nuanced view of the regent has already undergone some

⁷ BÉLY, "Le royaume de France et les Pays-Bas," p. 647.

⁸ Paris - La Courneuve, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et Européennes (AMAE), *Correspondance politique* (CP), *Pays-Bas Espagnols et Autrichiens* (PBEA), vol. 67-90 (1713-24).

revision, in part thanks to two recent monographs by the French historian Alexandre Dupilet, but which primarily focus on domestic politics⁹.

Post-Utrecht Normalisation

Shortly after the War of the Spanish Succession, in the final phase of his long reign, Louis XIV insisted on the normalization of political relations with the Roman Emperor. An important instrument in the restoration of Franco-Austrian relations was the reestablishment of France's permanent diplomatic representation at the Habsburg court. That is why Charles-François de Vintimille, comte du Luc, was sent to Vienna as ambassador in January 1715. In the Austrian Netherlands, which was of evident political, economic and military interest to France, Paris was represented by Léandre de Rossi-Leoni, the marquis de Rossi. In December 1714 he was sent to Brussels as *chargé d'affaires* and he remained there until his death in 1726. A native of Perugia, he had served both Louis XIV and Philip V since 1702; among other assignments, he had been employed during the Utrecht negotiations, and he headed up an extensive espionage network¹⁰. These experiences served him well in the Austrian Netherlands, where he also had access to a great many informants.

⁹ Alexandre DUPILET, *Le Cardinal Dubois: le génie politique de la Régence*, Paris, 2015; Alexandre DUPILET, *La Régence absolue: Philippe d'Orléans et la polysynodie, 1715-1718*, Seyssell, 2011.

¹⁰ Lucien BÉLY, *Espions et ambassadeurs au temps de Louis XIV*, Paris, 2007, p. 56-58; Bruno DEMOULIN, "La France et les Pays-Bas autrichiens à l'aube du XVIIIe siècle", in *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, 175 (2009), p. 542.

The instructions Rossi received from the French State Secretary for Foreign Affairs (*secrétaire d'Etat des affaires étrangères*), Jean-Baptiste Colbert de Torcy, were in line with France's reconciliation efforts with Vienna. During 1715, discussion of the restoration of the “bonne intelligence” - a term that often appears in diplomatic correspondence - repeatedly appeared in the letters exchanged between Rossi and Torcy. In order to rebuild this “good understanding” between France and Austria, Rossi was to direct his attention towards the Austrian minister plenipotentiary, Count Joseph von Königsegg, who was the *de facto* replacement for the ever-absent governor, Eugène de Savoie¹¹. According to Rossi, Königsegg appeared very receptive to French overtures, but the Austrian authorities in Brussels and Vienna - just like those in The Hague and London - generally continued to harbour suspicions regarding Bourbon intentions. Their scepticism was not entirely unjustified, as Torcy's letters to Rossi demonstrate that despite the peaceable discourse sometimes employed, the ambition to gain control of the Southern Netherlands remained. For example, in March 1715, Torcy wrote “je ne doute pas que le desir de voir quelque jour les Paysbas unis à la France, n'augmente dans la suite des temps, mais Sa Majesté veut conserver en paix les grands Etats que Dieu luy a donnez sans songer à les augmenter”¹².

Rossi's activities in Brussels were informed by this point of view. He regularly reported on opinions in the Austrian Netherlands with regard to France in general as well as to any future French annexation - not all of which were negative. During the region's transfer to Austrian rule, not all Southern Netherlanders had been pro-Habsburg. Philip of Anjou also had a small

¹¹ Torcy to Rossi, Versailles, 11 April 1715, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 68, f. 220v.

¹² Torcy to Rossi, Versailles, 28 March 1715, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 68, f. 200r.

but influential following, as did the Elector of Bavaria, who had held sovereignty over the disputed region between 1711 and 1714¹³. In addition, Rossi frequently wrote about the activities of a group of French-minded inhabitants who often expressed their loyalty to the Bourbon dynasty. The existence of these pro-French sentiments in the Southern Netherlands was to a large extent the result of the strategy Louis XIV had developed since his marriage to Maria Theresa in order to strengthen the personal ties between the Flemish elites and France, among other things by means of a well-considered marriage policy and the subsequent integration of the French and Flemish nobility. At the same time, by threats and intimidation, but also by granting political and economic favours and offering protection, Louis XIV had also succeeded in spreading the conviction that France was the only power that could actually safeguard the social, political and especially patrimonial interests of the aristocracy of the Southern Netherlands, much more than the powerless Spanish Habsburgs or other European states could. When the Spanish succession came to the table, a seizure of power by the Bourbon dynasty was by some aristocratic families of the Habsburg Netherlands, as well as by parts of the trading bourgeoisie, certainly seen as a suitable means of getting out of the eternal impasse and safeguarding their interests in the longer term¹⁴. It is difficult to determine exactly how many pro-Bourbon Southern Netherlanders there were, but the fact that Rossi pays so much attention to them is nevertheless revealing. Torcy therefore ordered Rossi to maintain good relations with these pro-French individuals while taking care not to

¹³ See Klaas VAN GELDER, *Regime change at a distance: Austria and the Southern Netherlands following the war of the Spanish succession, 1716-1725*, Louvain, 2016, p. 205-12.

¹⁴ Thomas GLESENER, *L'empire des exilés. Les Flamands et le gouvernement de l'Espagne au XVIIIe siècle*, Madrid, 2017, p. 19-67.

upset the authorities in Brussels¹⁵. And his contacts with this community were clearly excellent because in April 1716 Rossi even married a cousin of the Count of Bergeyck, one of the most influential politicians in Brussels, who had always promoted a good rapport with Versailles during the Anjouan regime¹⁶.

The Start of *la Régence*

In September 1715, Philip d'Orléans became regent and Marshal d'Huxelles became president of the Council of Foreign Affairs, and Rossi was soon cautioned to behave more circumspectly. Although the diplomat continued to report on pro-French sentiments, with or without exaggeration, d'Huxelles was initially much more reserved than his predecessor, Torcy, in his reflections on the value of this information; according to him, "l'interest de Sa Majesté etant ... de ne rien faire qui puisse être contraire en quelque manière que ce soit à la bonne intelligence"¹⁷. Rossi was even to avoid critics of the Austrian administration as much as possible¹⁸.

Paris's - albeit temporary - reticence must be viewed in light of the inextricably linked contexts of both the regent's precarious domestic situation and his international isolation during the early months of his government. When he took office, d'Orléans could not count on widespread support in court circles; the largely Anjouan-minded aristocracy, who held seats

¹⁵ Torcy to Rossi, Versailles, 11 April 1715, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 68, f. 223r.

¹⁶ VAN GELDER, *Regime change at a distance*, p. 91-94.

¹⁷ D'Huxelles to Rossi, Paris, 3 August 1716, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 72, f. 23v-24r.

¹⁸ D'Huxelles to Rossi, Paris, 8 December 1715, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 70, f. 141r-142v.

in various polysynodic councils, had a major influence on foreign policy¹⁹. While the polysynodal system created by the regent initially seemed an ideal way to exercise control over the recalcitrant aristocracy, it eventually proved inefficient and was abolished. Leading nobles, with d'Huxelles at their fore, were still in favour of a Bourbon alliance with Spain at the end of 1715, and they also gave financial support to the Catholic pretender to the English throne, James Stuart, who threatened the authority of George I.

However, d'Huxelles's anti-British attitude turned out to be counterproductive, as other European superpowers concluded a number of treaties between the end of 1715 and the summer of 1716, which caused the regent to become yet more isolated. Philip V of Spain signed a bilateral trade agreement with England in December 1715. In turn, George I concluded treaties with the Republic in February 1716 and with Charles VI four months later, after the Roman Emperor had tried in vain to renew the Grand Alliance of the War of the Spanish Succession. The latter treaty caused d'Huxelles to worry once again about the Habsburgs, and that is why he commissioned the marquis de Châteauneuf, the French ambassador in The Hague, to propose a treaty with the Republic that would guarantee the neutrality of the Austrian Netherlands. Brussels saw this as an act of desperation on the part of an isolated and fearful France seeking to protect its weak, northern border²⁰.

In June 1716, the regent finally rejected the isolationism of his Anjouan-minded court and sought diplomatic rapprochement with George I, who had concluded bilateral treaties with

¹⁹ DUPILET, *La Régence absolue*, p. 13.

²⁰ Rossi to d'Huxelles, Brussels, 10 January 1716, AMAE, CP, PBEA, 70, f. 187r-191r.

just about every other European superpower. This policy shift had been promoted for months by Guillaume Dubois - Philip d'Orléans's former tutor - who gradually worked his way up to *secrétaire d'Etat des affaires étrangères* and later became cardinal and first minister of France. This jurist *homo novus*, who was concerned with *Realpolitik* more than dynastic prestige²¹, was responsible for the Anglo-French treaty concluded on November 28, 1716, after tense negotiations and by means of substantial concessions from France²². This English-French alliance, which would become the main diplomatic axis of Europe during the *Trente Heureuses*, marked Dubois's first major victory over the anti-British d'Huxelles and other members of the Anjouan *vieille Cour*. From that moment onwards, Dubois would play a crucial role in formulating French foreign policy, and soon thereafter he gained a seat in the *Conseil des affaires étrangères*, thus providing d'Huxelles with a serious political opponent.

The Triple and Quadruple Alliances and Their Consequences

In early 1717, the Republic joined the English-French alliance, creating a Triple Alliance between France and Austria's former allies. Habsburg uneasiness over this state of affairs was signalled in Vienna and Brussels. Even before the final signing, Rossi noticed that "les Imperiaux temoignent de chagrin au sujet des traittés"²³. Among other things, this "chagrin" was expressed in the form of a particularly anti-French discourse. Concerns about the Triple Alliance intensified fear of Paris's territorial ambitions in the Austrian Netherlands, where

²¹ DUPILET, *Le Cardinal Dubois*, 136.

²² DHONDT, *Balance of power and norm hierarchy*, 77-83; Jeremy BLACK, *From Louis XIV to Napoleon: the fate of a great power*, London, 2001, p. 72.

²³ Rossi to d'Huxelles, Brussels, 16 October 1716, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 72, f. 108r-v.

rumours were rife that France and the maritime powers were about to conquer the area and divvy it up. Rossi suspected that the marquis of Prié, Königsegg's successor as minister plenipotentiary, who was much more critical of France, was spreading these rumours in an attempt to suppress certain pro-French elements in the population²⁴.

The new international context created by the Triple Alliance also had an impact on negotiations regarding the border between France and the Austrian Netherlands, which took place in Lille under the auspices of the Peace of Utrecht. These talks were intended to settle some disputes of both military and commercial nature, but they were held in an increasingly tense and uncompromising atmosphere. In June 1717, less than two months after the inception of the Triple Alliance, an irate Charles VI recalled his ambassadors from Lille and the talks were broken off²⁵. Austrian distrust and isolation thus had a direct effect on Franco-Habsburg relations as they developed in Brussels and Lille. Another factor that heightened Vienna's apprehension, was Philip V of Spain's military aggression. Despite having lost his Italian possessions in Utrecht - Naples, Milan and Sardinia to Charles VI, and Sicily to the duke of Savoy - he continued to lay claim to them. Until the spring of 1718, France and England continued to try to reconcile the Spanish king and the emperor in the hope of avoiding a large-scale conflict, but neither were willing to waive their territorial claims.

²⁴ Rossi to d'Huxelles, Brussels, 22 December 1716, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 72, f. 208r-209v.

²⁵ Tim DE BACKER, *De Vrede van Utrecht, Rastadt en Baden en de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden (1713-1731)*, Louvain (Masters diss. Catholic University of Leuven), 2007, p. 105.

Philip V's invasion of Sardinia in the July of 1717 and of Sicily a year later, and the emperor's fear of a Franco-Spanish alliance, led to talks regarding a four-way treaty between the maritime powers, France, and Austria, which resulted in the Quadruple Alliance. A great deal of work was invested in the agreement, but its signing in London on August 2, 1718, was met with anything but enthusiasm in Vienna, Brussels, and Paris. Together with his British counterpart, Minister Stanhope, Dubois had laid out a path to diplomatic reconciliation with Austria, but d'Huxelles and the Anjouan *vieille Cour* remained committed to supporting the Spanish king's territorial claims in Italy²⁶. It was not until the end of 1718 that the regent was able to put an end to the roiling power struggle between the French court's two political factions.

Elsewhere, in the period between Philip's invasion of Sardinia and the ratification of the Quadruple Alliance, rumours grew of a French-Spanish alliance. In Brussels's governmental circles this was accompanied by the fear that France would use a war against the emperor as an opportunity to seize the Austrian Netherlands²⁷, and even that Philip V was preparing for a Spanish invasion, which the dissatisfied inhabitants - some of which were Anjouan sympathizers - would perhaps support²⁸. An additional factor that encouraged mistrust among the Austrian officials in Brussels were some incidents of urban unrest in the spring of

²⁶ DUPILET, *Le Cardinal Dubois*, p. 157.

²⁷ Rossi to d'Huxelles, Brussels, 21 December 1717, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 76, f. 159v-160r.

²⁸ Rossi to d'Huxelles, Brussels, 11 May 1718, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 78, f. 195r-199r.

1718²⁹. In short, the new regime not only had to fear their southern neighbour, but it was also threatened by some of its own subjects.

Brussels's wariness does not appear entirely unfounded if one takes into account Rossi's interest in both the pro-French and anti-Habsburg sentiments in the Austrian Netherlands. As time went on, Rossi reported on this matter more frequently, and with growing exuberance. He constantly underlined the fragility of the emperor's authority and Southern Netherlandish discontent, which, together with pro-French sentiments, he felt would be to France's advantage if war broke out over Italy. Even after the emperor approved the Quadruple Alliance in April 1718, Rossi remained enthusiastic about the fact that members of the local nobility continued to hope that Spain would not accept the agreement reached on Italy, and that a conflict could still lead to a Bourbon take over. And Paris was clearly becoming more enthusiastic too. While Rossi's reports had been met with a reserved attitude early in the regency, d'Huxelles now explicitly asked the diplomat to keep an eye on the evolution of opinions about the emperor's rule in the Austrian Netherlands, and on pro-French sympathizers³⁰. So even though there was an official Franco-Austrian alliance that theoretically eliminated the French threat to the Austrian Netherlands by prohibiting offensive actions, this just meant that no concrete plans for annexation were discussed in the diplomatic correspondence between Paris and the *chargé d'affaires* in Brussels. Annexation under the cover of a wider conflict, however, remained a possible option.

²⁹ VAN GELDER, *Regime change at a distance*, p. 238-42.

³⁰ D'Huxelles to Rossi, Paris, 7 May 1717, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 75, f. 220r.

Yet one objective outweighed all others in 1718: achieving some kind of stability. This was more important than French expansionism, Austrian mistrust or the longstanding Bourbon-Habsburg feud. Most European superpowers were still in military and economic recovery from the War of the Spanish Succession, and more than anything else they wanted to avoid a new European-wide conflict. This was also the case in France, but the government's choice was not the result of external considerations, regardless of the discourse peddled by the regent and his new confidant, Dubois. Rather, factors such as the lack of sufficient financial resources, the realities of international politics at the time and the internal power struggle at the French court were responsible for France's peaceful international stance, which in turn led to the Triple and Quadruple Alliances. In order to further solidify this state of affairs, Stanhope and Dubois continued to try to bring Philip V into the fold right up until the declaration of war at the end of 1718.

Rising Tensions between Brussels and Paris (1718-1721)

In the autumn of 1718, in the run-up to the war of the Quadruple Alliance, *la Régence* entered a new stage, which Alexandre Dupilet called the "authoritarian phase"³¹. In September, the regent abolished the polysynody following the fierce opposition to the Quadruple Alliance carried out by d'Huxelles and other influential members of the French nobility. That so many members of the seven central governmental councils wanted France to unite with Spain in a war against their hereditary Habsburg enemy sent a very bad message to the regent's brand-new allies, George I and Charles VI. Philip d'Orléans did not need his foreign policy

³¹ DUPILET, *La Régence absolue*, p. 331-32.

undermined at home, and so the recalcitrant *conseils* were replaced with a set of loyal *secrétaires d'Etat*, including the pragmatic Dubois, who became responsible for international affairs and thus gained even more influence on French foreign policy. As the architect of the recently concluded treaties, he was charged with maintaining those fragile alliances, and was thereby responsible for preserving stability in Europe - albeit in vain.

At the end of 1718, the terms of the Quadruple Alliance meant that France, however reluctantly, would have to follow England in declaring war against Spain. Philip V and his chief minister, Cardinal Alberoni, persisted in their ambition to retake the Italian territories by force, despite numerous reconciliation attempts on the part of both England and France. Then the Cellamare conspiracy was uncovered in Paris in December 1718³², and this provided the ideal excuse for Dubois to declare war on Spain on January 9, 1719. France sent troops to the Basque districts and Catalonia, and British and Imperial troops successfully fought the Spanish army in Italy. The war lasted until February 1720, when Philip V had to admit his crushing defeat and officially joined the Quadruple Alliance. This was of course a victory for the allies, but it was even more so for the durable diplomatic alliance system that had been constructed by the Franco-British tag team of Dubois and Stanhope.

But despite the reconciliatory discourse of Dubois and the Franco-Austrian axis of the Quadruple Alliance between 1718 and 1720, the mutual mistrust between Paris and Brussels

³² This failed conspiracy, named after the Spanish ambassador in Paris, was led by Cardinal Alberoni and a few domestic enemies of the duc d'Orléans, and their intent was to take the regent prisoner, and install Philip V in his place.

persisted, and even grew. The Habsburg side feared France's military and financial recovery - now that the country had dug itself out of the hole caused by the War of the Spanish Succession, it was in an increasingly strong diplomatic and military position. Both Prié in Brussels and Austria's ambassador in Paris, Pendterriedter, wrote of their fear of French covetousness with regard to the Austrian Netherlands³³. In the Netherlands, rumours constantly circulated that France was making military preparations at the border and some Austrian officers in Brussels were convinced that "la première guerre que l'Empereur aura sera contre la France"³⁴. And indeed, Quadruple Alliance or not, France's interest in the Austrian Netherlands never completely disappeared. Rossi continued to report on and rejoice in the pro-Bourbon sentiments expressed in Brussels and on the population's dissatisfaction with the Austrian. Meanwhile, from Paris Dubois continued to emphasize the importance of a "bonne intelligence" between the regent and the emperor, and the two states did remain treaty partners. Therefore, the start of the "authoritarian phase" of *la Régence* did not bring about a profound change in France's cautious policy towards its northern neighbour, which is not surprising given the international diplomatic situation at that time.

It is also worth considering that mistrust worked both ways; there were developments in the Austrian Netherlands that increasingly worried Paris. For example, France eyed the commercial expansion of Ostend with suspicion - and some unease. For several years, various entrepreneurs attempted to initiate trading expeditions from the port, and French traders

³³ Prié to Pendterriedter, Brussels, 2 March 1720, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 83, f. 22v-23r.; Pendterriedter to Prié, Paris, 30 December 1719, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 82, f. 205r-208v.

³⁴ Rossi to Dubois, Brussel, 22 December 1719, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 80, f. 201v.

were also very interested in doing so, much to the dismay of Paris. Godefroy de la Merveille, an experienced captain from Saint-Malo, was one of the first to depart from Ostend for the East Indies in the spring of 1718³⁵. France, however, was by no means the only major European state concerned about the commercial activities in Ostend. More importantly, the two maritime powers - England and the Republic - were explicit in their dissatisfaction, which did not ease with the passage of time. On the contrary, the establishment of the *Generale Keizerlijke en Koninklijke Indische Compagnie* - the Ostend Company for short - in 1722, was met with vociferous protest in various European capitals. Under the terms of the Quadruple Alliance such a trading company was not yet permissible, although there had been increasingly frequent rumours about such plans. As a result, Rossi occasionally sent a secret envoy, the French merchant Du Coudray, to Ostend starting in 1718 with orders to monitor the commercial (and military) developments in the port, and he was permanently stationed there from July 1720 onwards³⁶. Another major source of irritation were some of the new customs offices that the Austrian regime erected on the Franco-Luxembourg border. These monitored important trade routes connecting France with Liège, the Republic, and states in the Holy Roman Empire. Rossi had unsuccessfully appealed against these customs posts to Prié several times, after which Dubois threatened to set up customs posts on the French side of the border in October 1719³⁷.

³⁵ Jan PARMENTIER, *De holle compagnie: smokkel en legale handel onder Zuidnederlandse vlag in Bengalen, ca. 1720-1744*, Hilversum, 1992, p. 11.

³⁶ Rossi to Dubois, Brussels, 29 July 1720, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 81, f. 120r.

³⁷ Dubois to Rossi, Paris, 8 October 1719, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 80, f. 145r.

While tensions between Paris and Brussels had gradually increased during the War of the Quadruple Alliance in 1718-1720, a French-Spanish detente arose. After months of lobbying at the Spanish court, a Franco-Spanish alliance was signed into existence in Madrid on March 27, 1721. This agreement was reinforced in the traditional way: a double marriage between Louis XV and the *infanta* Maria Anna Victoria, and the regent's daughter Louise-Elisabeth and the eldest son of the Spanish king³⁸. And shortly afterwards, on June 13, 1721, England also acceded to the treaty in consequence of the strong Franco-British diplomatic partnership that had formed during *La Régence*. But as a result of these diplomatic manoeuvres, Charles VI threatened to become isolated, and a marked imbalance arose between the House of Habsburg and the French alliance complex with European superpowers from northern and southern Europe. This asymmetry, in combination with the border and trade disputes, led to increasing fears of French aggression in the Austrian Netherlands, and contributed to the plummeting state of diplomatic relations. Prié had already expressed his concerns about French territorial ambitions a year earlier in great detail - or so Vienna and Brussels perceived it - in a letter to Pentterriedter, in which he wrote that the French-Austrian “bonne intelligence que des interets forts accidentels ont cimenté”³⁹, would soon cease, despite the pro-peace discourse that Dubois continued to employ.

Because of its looming diplomatic - and possibly military - isolation in Europe, the Austrian administration in the Netherlands began to take steps to protect itself against France. For example, when rumours of a French-Spanish alliance spread during 1720, Prié introduced

³⁸ BLACK, *From Louis XIV to Napoleon*, p. 74.

³⁹ Prié to Pentterriedter, Brussels, 2 March 1720, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 83, f. 23r.

extremely rigorous protectionist measures. He did so under the pretext of safeguarding the Habsburg Netherlands from an epidemic that was ravaging Provence at the time, but which never even reached the northern regions of France⁴⁰. What Prié wanted was to establish a defensive line from Namur to Ostend that would subject French traders who wanted to enter the Austrian Netherlands to strict controls - whether they moved their goods overland or via the port of Ostend⁴¹. These measures were detrimental to French trade and Dubois dropped his reconciliation discourse. He resorted to economic reprisals by applying similar regulations to merchants from the Austrian Netherlands⁴². According to Rossi, this ultimately led to a relaxation of Prié's protectionism in the Netherlands. However, when the threefold alliance between France, England, and Spain was settled in the summer of 1721, the restrictions in the Austrian Netherlands were again tightened up⁴³. Franco-Austrian relations had reached a new low, partly due to the international context; disputes were no longer resolved entirely via diplomatic consultation, and bilateral economic sanctions were put in place.

Old Ambitions Never Fade Away (1721-1723)

Thus at the end of *la Régence*, Austria once again considered France a genuine military threat, which led the Austrian regime to pay a great deal more attention to the defence of the southern border. Moreover, Vienna and Brussels were not the only ones on their guard, the government in The Hague was also very vigilant. For example, the Republic made numerous

⁴⁰ Monique LUCENET, *Les grandes pestes en France*, Paris, 1985, p. 264.

⁴¹ Copy of an imperial decree sent to Rossi, Brussels, 17 October 1720, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 83, f. 147r-148r.

⁴² Dubois to Rossi, Paris, 22 November 1720, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 81, f. 317r-v.

⁴³ Du Coudray to Rossi, Ostend, 21 June 1721, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 84, f. 271r-274r.

repairs to the barrier fortifications from 1722 onwards. But was the purported French threat real, and the distrust justified?

While France's territorial ambitions were discussed more explicitly in 1722, it is important to frame these ambitions - and the increasing Franco-Austrian tension over the Southern Netherlands - within the contemporary international political context, in which there was the real possibility of a new European-wide war. Distrust between Austria and Spain ran deep, which was demonstrated, among other things, by the unpromising start of the Cambrai peace congress (1722-1725) that followed the War of the Quadruple Alliance. This was intended to reach a definitive agreement between Charles VI and Philip V, but the government in the Southern Netherlands had very low expectations considering Austria's much weaker international position in relation to the French-Spanish bloc. Meanwhile, the Bourbon rapprochement was confirmed yet again in the summer of 1722 with an additional French-Spanish wedding, this time of Philip V's son Don Carlos (the later Carlos III) with Philippine-Élisabeth, one of the Regent's daughters. Vienna viewed this as a direct provocation, and Pentterriedter, a member of the Austrian delegation in Cambrai and formerly the Imperial ambassador in Paris, responded to the news with the tell-tale words "Hé bien, vive la guerre!"⁴⁴. In fact, actual peace negotiations did not begin until 1724 - after the reign of d'Orléans ended⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ DHONDT, *Balance of Power and Norm Hierarchy*, p. 269.

⁴⁵ Rossi to Dubois, Brussel, 7 January 1722, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 85, f. 10r-11v.

France following *la Régence* was in a totally different international position than when the regent came to power in 1715. The strategist Dubois, who had been made cardinal and then First Minister in August 1722, had anchored the regime in solid alliances. This meant that the diplomatic caution exhibited during the early years of *la Régence* was no longer necessary, and thus France's territorial ambitions were expressed more openly - at least by the French envoys in the Austrian Netherlands. Moreover, the prospect of a new Franco-Austrian conflict gave rise to reflection on France's options with regard to the Southern Netherlands. Both Rossi and his representative in Ostend, Du Coudray, saw a conflict as the ideal opportunity to finally gain control of the Southern Netherlands. In 1722, Dubois asked Rossi to draw up a detailed survey of the troops in the Austrian Netherlands and the general state of affairs - according to the cardinal this was just as a precaution in order to gauge Austria's intentions. However, the *chargé d'affaires* produced an eighty-page letter that went far beyond a mere description of the military defensive capability of the Austrian Netherlands⁴⁶. After an extensive discussion of the inhabitants' dissatisfaction, the persistence of pro-French sentiments among certain groups, and their possible uses in a conflict, Rossi went on to lay out a plan for military invasion, "une idée que j'ay formée aprez de meures reflexions, pour se rendre maistre de ces pays cy sans beaucoup de peine"⁴⁷.

In direct contrast with the vague talk of retaking the Southern Netherlands that he occasionally expressed during the first years of *la Régence*, Rossi now made explicit proposals to quickly and effectively overpower the region. Shortly afterwards, his secret envoy, Du

⁴⁶ Rossi to Dubois, "Relation des Paysbas", Brussels, 8 August 1722, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 85, f. 269r-309v.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 305r.

Coudray, produced a detailed plan for conquest via the port of Ostend⁴⁸. In December 1722, the foundation of the Ostend Company was swiftly met with stiff international opposition, primarily on the part of England and the Republic. France was also less than pleased to see maritime economic competition so close to its border, but Dubois ordered his envoys in the Netherlands not to take a strong stance against the new company. In addition to Dubois's official French discourse of peace and reconciliation, there were other motivations for appearing impartial according to Du Coudray. He realized that France, facing the prospect of a war and annexation of the Austrian Netherlands, had every interest in keeping the Southern Netherlandish merchant classes on its side, while letting the maritime powers - who were far from popular - take the lead in opposing the Ostend Company⁴⁹.

The sources clearly demonstrate how expansionism had resurfaced in French diplomatic circles in 1722-1723, and that it was no longer limited to an "offensive defense", in other words the argument that if France were to take military action in the Netherlands it would be purely to defend the *pré carré* against a Habsburg threat from the north. Rather, the plans outlined above, and the views expressed by agents of the French Crown, undercut the views of several historians that post-Louis XIV France had definitively eschewed its expansionist ambitions with regard to Southern Netherlands - at least as far as the period of *la Régence* is concerned. Certainly, there can be no doubt that Rossi and Du Coudray were considering how to achieve permanent territorial gains.

⁴⁸ Du Coudray to Rossi, "*Projet pour surprendre la ville d'Ostende*", Ostend, December 1722, AMAE, CP, PBEA, 86, f. 257r-260r.

⁴⁹ Du Coudray to Rossi, Ostend, 16 June 1723, AMAE, CP, PBEA, 88, f. 184r-v.

In December 1722, and again eyeing the prospect of a renewed military conflict with Austria, Du Coudray presented Rossi with a “Projet d’un manifeste qui doit estre repandu dans le Paysbas Autrichien”⁵⁰. In it, the agent discussed how after the hoped-for invasion, France had to produce a manifesto stating that it had always regarded the inhabitants of the Austrian Netherlands to be French subjects, and he also indicated what other flatteries could induce the inhabitants to accept an annexation. Rossi also pondered “la manière de les gouverner”⁵¹, and concluded that in order to permanently capture the hearts and minds of the Southern Netherlanders, France should safeguard urban privileges. The repeated and emphatic pleas for an invasion of the Austrian Netherlands and its annexation by Rossi and Du Coudray, indicate that territorial ambition was not limited to agents abroad. Rather, these examples and other reflections contained in the French correspondence suggest that the central government in Paris were amenable to the idea.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the outspokenness of diplomats such as Rossi and Du Coudray, First Minister Dubois, who always had to bear in mind the broader picture when drafting foreign policy, exhibited a more nuanced attitude. For example, Dubois was entirely convinced of the support for France among parts of the Southern Netherlandish elite; in 1723 he even told Rossi that “c’est un avantage et une chose agréable que de pouvoir estre convaincu qu’à la premiere occasion on peut compter non seulement sur leurs concours à se donner un nouveau maitre, mais encore sur leur constance à demeurer sous la Domination

⁵⁰ Du Coudray to Rossi, Ostend, December 1722, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 86, f. 269r-271r.

⁵¹ Rossi to Dubois, Brussels, 14 April 1723, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 87, f. 233v.

du Roi s'ils y estoient une fois passés"⁵². And yet unlike Rossi or Du Coudray, he did not consider these pro-French elements of immediate use in the nearby future; given that, at that moment, maintaining Europe's peace was his primary concern, he was less enthusiastic than the French envoys in the Austrian Netherlands when it came to ambitious military discourse.

However, Dubois's relatively constant and unambiguous discourse promoting a European balance of power or a general peace needs closer examination. Naturally, considerations about the balance of power on the part of the juridically trained Dubois have been given a great deal of attention by historians, and his correspondence is peppered with references to the *tranquillité générale* in Europe⁵³. This desire to preserve the peace and spare France a new war was, moreover, the only motive that Dubois explicitly mentioned in his letters to Rossi. As such, it is unlikely that this was nothing more than a mere figure of speech, as Sofka has argued with regard to the use of this discourse by states and governments during the eighteenth century when discussing their international political motivations⁵⁴. At the same time, more pragmatic and *Realpolitik* motives also played their part in post-Utrecht France and the stance that *la Régence* seemed to be taking at the international level.

In the first phase of *la Régence*, Philip faced fierce domestic opposition, an exhausted state treasury, and an anti-French international climate. All had helped to ensure that the regent could not pursue an ambitious foreign policy; however, other factors and motives were at

⁵² Dubois to Rossi, Versailles, 23 April 1723, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 87, f. 282r.

⁵³ Dubois to Rossi, Versailles, 12 July 1720, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 81, f. 86r-87v.

⁵⁴ SOFKA, "The eighteenth century international system", p. 149-53.

play during the later years of the regency. The miserable state of the government's finances remained a constant point of concern, but now, maintaining the system of strategic alliances that Dubois had so carefully constructed during Philip's regency became a priority. Any dynastic prestige or military glory that could accrue from the annexation of the Austrian Netherlands, was subordinate to Dubois's business of preserving peace in the French kingdom, which was inextricably and inevitably linked to ensuring general peace in Europe. Dubois provided a frank justification for this pragmatic pacifism when he informed Rossi that "il est des momens ou les affaires principales ne permettent pas d'agiter celles qui peuvent estre regardées comme subordonnées"⁵⁵. For Dubois, these "affaires principales" consisted of two things: the preservation of the general peace and - despite diplomatic tensions - establishing an amicable relationship with the emperor. Both would ensure the much-needed domestic tranquillity in France, and even after Dubois' death in August 1723, these two considerations formed the basis of French foreign policy for years to come.

Conclusion

It is undoubtedly true that the Treaty of Utrecht ushered in a new phase in French foreign policy. The international political position of *la Régence* was a break with the almost continuous wars the country experienced under Louis XIII and Louis XIV. In an apparent about face, France actively worked to build alliances, it avoided being drawn into wars by the Bourbon king of Spain, and - above all - it became known as "une nation satisfaite" that was no longer interested in expanding its borders. Nevertheless, the above analysis has shown

⁵⁵ Dubois to Rossi, Versailles, 10 September 1722, AMAE, CP, *PBEA*, 86, f. 6v-7r.

that France's policy formation was less clear cut than its official discourse. Torcy emphasized the importance of "une bonne intelligence" with Austria, but he surreptitiously indicated that he was open to the possibility of annexing the Habsburg Netherlands at some point in the future. His successor, d'Huxelles, showed himself more cautious at the start of the regency because d'Orléans's position was by no means domestically secure, and moreover because France was also isolated internationally as a result of taking a persistently anti-British stance. Later, however, he too was intensely interested in pro-French sentiments among the Southern Netherlandish elites.

Yet the figure who had the greatest impact on France's foreign policy both during and after *la Régence* was, of course, Dubois. Under his watch in the summer of 1716, the regent sought a diplomatic rapprochement with George I. The Anglo-French alliance that resulted then came to form the basis of a broader European coalition, which gradually gave France more space in which to manoeuvre internationally. In Vienna and Brussels, this caused renewed anxieties regarding a possible French invasion and annexation of the Southern Netherlands. When Philip V pressed his claims to Italian territories by force of arms, Austria feared that this was the harbinger of Franco-Spanish military actions against the House of Habsburg. These shifts in international relations caused Rossi and Du Coudray to enthusiastically report on the support that the Bourbons enjoyed in the Southern Netherlands, and they were also quite explicit in making the case for French annexation. Border and trade disputes put even more pressure on the already strained relationship between France and Austria. Finally, in 1722, the French envoys in the Austrian Netherlands drew up bold offensive plans that left little to the imagination.

While the reports and opinions of a *chargé d'affaires* and his colleague obviously do not constitute definitive proof that expansionist urges remained widespread throughout French political circles, it is also difficult to find out exactly how common such notions were at the beginning of the eighteenth century. At the very least, it is clear from the correspondence of Rossi and Du Coudray that an urge to annex the Southern Netherlands was alive and well among French diplomats. Moreover, it is obviously the case that some parts of the French aristocracy continued to harbour violent hostility towards the House of Habsburg, and even with Dubois there are subtle indications that he was not wholly opposed to the proposition. As such, Rossi and Du Coudray were probably not isolated in their ambitions.

But Dubois had to carefully delineate France's priorities when it came to foreign policy. The territorial desires of Rossi and Du Coudray - which it can be surmised were held by others as well - had to be considered in relation to the country's greater interests. Dubois connected the tranquillity of France with the tranquillity of Europe in general, and this is in line with his discourse regarding the desire for a balance of power in Europe as a surety for harmonious coexistence. Nevertheless, his choices were probably also motivated by the realization that French military aggression, against the Austrian Netherlands for example, would certainly be seen as a provocation by many countries, resulting in a pan-European coalition against France that would in turn be based on the very same discourse on the maintenance of a balance of power. Thus Dubois linked the theoretical considerations about European equilibrium to France's concrete interests, and weighed his options according to the circumstances of the time.

At first glance, Philip d'Orléans's pro-peace regime might seem weaker than that of his aggressive predecessors, but in reality, this policy proved both coherent and farsighted. Risky and expensive territorial ambitions were set aside and sustainable, durable alliances were forged with former enemies. This led to a quarter of a century peace for the kingdom of France. By balancing national interests within a framework of pan-European stability, the regent and Cardinal Dubois in particular, proved to be strategically driven statesmen who acted with reference to a long-term vision. The price that had to be paid for this was the definitive renunciation of "le rêve impossible". At least, that was what Paris wanted other European capitals to believe.

This policy was a temporary positioning in function of the fluctuating political situation. France had cherished the ambition to annex the Southern Netherlands since the late Middle Ages and had striven to do so with all its might, especially during the second half of the seventeenth century. That it had not quite given up hope of achieving this goal was borne out during the War of the Austrian Succession, when after a brief wait, France overran the Austrian Netherlands in 1744, and implemented concrete measures to definitively annex parts of the counties of Hainault and Flanders⁵⁶. The 1748 Treaty of Aix-la-Chappelle ultimately reversed this situation, but Paris continued to cast its eyes to the north. Two years after the successful annexation of the Southern Netherlands in 1795, in the Peace of Campo-Formio, Emperor Francis II renounced "all his rights and titles over the former Belgian provinces known as the Austrian Netherlands", ceding them to France. The treaty stated that

⁵⁶ Pieterjan SCHEPENS, *A Sketch of Policy. France and the Southern Netherlands during the War of the Austrian Succession*, Ghent (Masters diss. Ghent University), 2015, p. 93-94.

"the French Republic shall possess these countries in perpetuity, with total sovereignty and proprietorship, and with all the territorial advantages dependent thereon"⁵⁷. This was everything Rossi and Du Coudray had hoped for. It seemed that the impossible dream had finally come true.

⁵⁷ Treaty of Campo-Formio (17 October 1797), art. III. Alexandre DE CLERCQ, ed., *Recueil des traités de la France*, I, Paris, 1864, p. 336.