

## The Southern Frontier (19th century) <sup>1</sup>

### Masterpiece and historical miscalculation

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When the Napoleonic war ended in 1814, the states involved met in Vienna to negotiate the future of Europe. But what did they want? Great Britain was clear: "*There could be neither safety nor peace for England, but with the safety and peace of Europe*", words from Lord Grenville, British prime minister from 1806-1807. This view was already the basis of a memorandum in 1805 by William Pitt the Younger, then Prime Minister. In this memorandum he formulated the British target for the situation after the end of the war with France. Not only did France have to give up all conquered territories but also measures had to be taken to prevent this country from causing devastation in Europe. Under the mentioned measures we find explicitly the strengthening of independent Netherlands. This led to a construction-process of a project of an unknown size at that time, an unprecedented financial complexity and financial pressure that led Great Britain to introduce income tax for the first time in its history and to suspend the repay of the paper money, introduced during the war.



Lord Castleragh(1769-1822) (source: Wikimedia Commons)

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with the Southern frontier from the time of Menno van Coehoorn (1641-1704)

## The Southern Frontier

Partly because Great Britain did not ask territorial requirements at the Vienna's Congress, the diplomat Lord Castlereagh could almost completely push through the British vision. That was especially true of the control of possible future French expansive actions. Soon agreement was reached about the need for a strong buffer on the northern border. That would then be the strengthened Netherlands.

Under reinforcement of the Netherlands, the Allies not only understood the construction of a defensive line between France and the Netherlands (the Southern Frontier) but also an enlargement of the territory of the Netherlands, so that a population could be reached that would allow the formation of a powerful army.

This view closed wonderfully to the ambitions of the sovereign prince William.

Already in the first months of 1813 the contours of the new Netherlands were discussed. On April 27, the then still Prince William Frederik had a conversation with the British foreign minister Lord Castlereagh. The prince wanted to know, among other things, what the plans of the allies were with regards to his future. Also what the size of his territory would be. For the time being the answer was rather general: England was there to help make the Netherlands more resilient with a border "*plus forte et plus compacte*". This was not much of help for William and at the end of the year he made clear his vision in a memorandum to Castlereagh. He referred to the Barrier Treaty (1715, Utrecht Peace Treaty) and gave as his opinion that the considerations that applied at that time were still valid. And therefore it was necessary to increase Dutch territory in such a way that a defence against a French attack had to be able to stand for as long as the Allies would have come to the aid.

However, the Barrier cities and fortresses did not suffice... Expansion was needed with Luxembourg and Gulik [Jülich] (to cover the area between Meuse and Rhine). He also thought of the occupied German areas between the Meuse, the Moselle and the Rhine which were occupied by France. There was understanding for this within the British government, but mainly under the influence of Austria and Prussia an agreement was signed on 21 June 1814 with the London protocol that nevertheless did less meet William's wishes. It was determined that the territory of the Netherlands would include: the Austrian Netherlands, the old Republic and the country of Liège. Subsequently, some border corrections had to be made on a number of points. The southern boundary of this area would then globally be the course of the line that was called the Southern Frontier. Calculated from the North Sea, it was a line from Nieuwpoort via Ypres (Ieper), Menin (Menen), Tournai (Doornik), Mons (Bergen), Charleroi, Namur (Namen), Huy (Hoei) and Liège (Luik) to Maastricht. Financing and execution of this gigantic work had to be arranged.



## Financing

As is common with international initiatives: there were various stakeholders, but nobody wanted to pay. That France had to pay seemed to be obvious. During the Napoleonic wars, that country had caused enormous damage to people and property. And, as important, it couldn't resist the agreements made by the Allies. Not yet, because that would change! Russia, Austria and Prussia also had their arguments to decline, so the burden came on the shoulders of Great Britain and the Netherlands. And the costs were huge. The global budget amounted to more than 70 million guilders and it was agreed that the costs would be distributed as follows:

- France 60 million francs (about 28 million guilders) from the imposed compensation of a total 700 francs
- Great Britain £ 2 million (around 22 million guilders)
- The Netherlands 20 million guilders.

The British Parliament found it hard to digest. Castlereagh, who had to defend the proposal, also made it appear that the British share in the costs was the purchase price for the Cape of Good Hope that Great Britain would then acquire from the Netherlands. That was incorrect, which would appear from later documents. He could, however, rely on the fact that with the same agreement on 13 August 1814 the Netherlands renounced Cape of Good Hope, Demerara, Essequibo and Berbice. However, that did not mean that all of Parliament's objections had been overcome. Also later in the settlements that took place annually, the British regularly did introduce new 'creative' arguments to escape part of their obligations.

On June 1, 1816, the Netherlands presented a 'Special Fund for the fortification and arming of the Southern Frontier'. Because the implementation of the project was estimated at five years, France was ordered to pay its contribution to the fund in five annual instalments. The arrangement was not that simple for Great Britain. Firstly, the British stipulated that they would only make a payment if the French part had been used for the year in question. Besides, they still had some financial matters to settle with the Netherlands, they thought. In February 1818, Castlereagh sent a list of claims.

Great Britain had made some payments to Prince William Frederik to equip his troops during the liberation of the Netherlands. Mention was made of clothing for the troops, weapons, frigates and the costs of Hanoverian troops. The reasoning was that England never was in a financial relationship with the Netherlands, where the one supported the other financially. The mentioned funds were provided 'as matter of accommodation and not of grant'. The total amount was about 11 million guilders, and that was deducted from the English contribution to the Special Fund. Finally, some unforeseen costs were borne by the Netherlands in the amount of 1.5 million guilders.

When the Special Fund was abandoned in March 1855, the total cost of constructing the Southern Frontier appeared to have been 88.5 million guilders and the Dutch share therein had been 32 million guilders. Comparison of the average purchasing power of those years with the current teaches that the Dutch costs for the construction and furnishing of Southern Frontier anno now would have been around 230 million euros. The total costs, converted, to more than 600 million euros would be so similar to those of the Delta Works.<sup>2</sup> There was, however, an important difference. The duration of the Delta works was estimated at 25 years, while the Southern Frontier had to be completed in five years, which shows that the costs for the Netherlands and even for Great Britain have been a very heavy burden.



*Huy Forttress (source: Wikimedia commons)*

## **Construction**

The construction of this enormous project was carried out under British-Dutch responsibility. That required unity of vision and procedures regarding design, implementation and supervision. And there it went wrong right away.

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<sup>2</sup> After massive floodings of the southern part of the Netherlands in 1953 a programme of building dams, hightening dikes, sluices and bridges was started, called the Deltaplan.



To begin with, there was the question: are those fortified cities such a good idea now? On the Dutch side, there was not a shared opinion on the value of fortresses in a possible war. King William I was of the opinion that fortresses should be the backbone of a defence. He was supported in this by the Inspector-General for Fortifications, General C.R.T. Kraijenhoff. Others, including the King's son, Prince William Frederik, put that meaning into perspective and emphasized that fortresses demanded too many troops and had proven to be of relative value in the last wars. On the British side, the same lack of unity of opinion lived, but Wellington took the plunge. In a memorandum he writes on 22 September 1814 to the British Minister of War and Colonies that he is aware that during the last war possession of fortified cities had been of relative little value. Yet in this case he thought it was. The idea was to be able to handle a rapid attack from the south. His conclusion was partly supported by his conviction that the terrain was favourable for, especially in the west, the attacker. He regretted the absence of natural barriers especially in that part of the line. Although the decision had thus been made, these contradictions continued for years.



*Arthur Duke of Wellington (1769-1852) (source: Wikimedia Commons)*

Then there was the struggle about responsibility. The British did not have a high opinion of Dutch engineers. They therefore took the initiative. Already on September 1, 1814, the Supreme Commander of the Allied armies, Arthur Duke of Wellington, ordered the British Lieutenant Colonel S.R. Chapman to explore the situation in a number of cities in West Flanders. This exploration led to an instruction written by Chapman for a British technical commission that had since been formed. That commission was charged with the design and execution of all the forts located in West Flanders. On the Dutch side, however, they did not let themselves be denied either. On September 20, 1814, General Kraijenhoff received the order of the sovereign prince William to carry out an exploration into the situation in all southern fortified cities '*because of the upcoming fortification of her new frontiers*'. William also wrote a letter to the British War Minister on 10 February 1815 in which he

stated that the Dutch government wanted all artillery and engineer goods in the various fortresses still occupied by English troops, to be transferred. That request was not granted.



*General C.R.T. Kraijenhoff*

The contrast focused on the draft-procedure for supervising implementation. The British were in favour of two technical commissions, one British and one Dutch. Each should be responsible for the design and implementation of a certain part of the line. Each design then needed the approval of the Dutch monarch. This division of duties was based on distrust on the British side. They considered the Dutch engineers not expert enough and that Dutch designs would become unnecessarily expensive. The English ambassador to the Netherlands thought that Kraijenhoff overestimated himself. Speaking on the Dutch Inspector-General of Fortifications he remarked sarcastically "*.., who no doubt already conceives himself a second Vauban ...*"

Kraijenhoff was against a procedure with two commissions. He predicted that something like that could only lead to confusion and wasting time and would conflict with Dutch interests. The Dutch engineers could do the job on their own. The king supported him in this.

In the first instance, diplomatic consultations did not produce anything, the British stayed with their opinion. In a letter from Wellington to Castlereagh dated 29 April 1816, he reported on a conversation that he had had with King William 1 he, Wellington complained to his minister that the king had placed the entire affair in the hands of Kraijenhoff. Also the king wished that Wellington would discuss everything with Kraijenhoff. He did not consider this in accordance with the wishes of

the British Parliament and those of the Allies. Still he left a hesitation. He wanted to look at it for a moment because of possible sensational publicity about this subject. Eventually the British tacked. Wellington was instructed by London on May 13, 1816 that he had to agree The Dutch opinion, because, in England, they had come to the conclusion that it was not possible to enforce English engineers on the basis of treaties. Exit British technical commission.

The partnership went, after that, in good mood. Every year Wellington inspected with Kraijenhoff the works in progress. And the special representative of Wellington, Colonel John Jones who in the meantime inspected the works and reported to his supervisor, eventually maintained even friendly ties with the Dutch engineers in charge of the work. Yet there was still a fundamental difference of opinion. That difference concerned the location of a second line in the back. Both parties agreed that a second line was necessary to give depth to the defence. Wellington opted for a line along the Scheldt from Oudenaarde to Antwerp. That would require the fortifying of Oudenaarde and Dendermonde. He also considered that defence works were needed to the south of Brussels, Halle and Waterloo. Kraijenhoff wanted to go along with fortifying Oudenaarde and Dendermonde, but he did not consider Halle and Waterloo logical and also being too expensive. In fact, he much preferred a second line from Antwerp to Maastricht along the Demer.



*Citadel of Namur (phot: C.G.F. Ampt)*

Different strategic plans underlie both opinions. From a British perspective it was important to retain Antwerp and Ostend after an enemy breakthrough and around it a large British bridgehead on the Continent. In addition, in November 1815, with the consent of King William 1, the Allies agreed that in the case of an acute French threat the British field army was to assemble around Brussels, thus

allowing Great Britain to enter the Netherlands with its troops. That area therefore also had to be secured. Kraijenhoff saw very sharply that in that case the Netherlands would become dependent on Prussia, who would then have to defend the gap east of Brussels. That is why he preferred to protect the entire southern flank of the Netherlands through a line of inundations in the valley of the Demer. This line of thinking was supported by the king. The parties have never agreed on this matter. Wellington insisted; in a letter to Castlereagh on June 26, 1818 he wrote: "*I consider the proposed works upon the Scheldt to be absolutely necessary upon any defensive system in the Netherlands*". He regularly put pressure on Kraijenhoff. Kraijenhoff shrugged off the discussion, agreed with Oudenaarde and Dendermonde but stayed silent for the rest. He played this game until 1821. From that time on the matter was no longer discussed. The question now is why none of the parties pushed the matter. It can be assumed that king William I considered himself bound by the November agreement of 1815, that he, although only afterwards, had agreed to. For his part, in this case too, Wellington did not seem convinced that his desire could be enforced on the basis of treaties. Added to that, on October 9, 1818 it was decided during the Congress of Aachen to withdraw the allied troops from France and to let France join the alliance. The danger of a surprise attack from the French side had therefore become low. Finally, tensions rose between France and Spain. A second line in Belgium received less priority as a result.

In the meantime, construction activities were progressing steadily. However, when in February 1815 Napoleon escaped from the island of Elba and began his hundred days ending with the Battle of Waterloo, the duties for Kraijenhoff were limited to the fortresses within the borders of the original Dutch Republic. The Belgian fortresses, or rather what was left of them, were occupied by English engineers. The already appointed Dutch engineers were withdrawn. But in October of that year the work could start. Then Kraijenhoff was able to submit to the king the sketches for the most important projects. The necessary facilities at the fortresses varied. For some, a sufficient repair of previous damage was enough, at other places, a complete reconstruction or a completely new design was necessary. From the outset the king was very involved in the design and construction. Already on November 15, 1815 he approved the works in Charleroi and Namur and on April 9, 1816 Ypres, Menin, Tournai, Ath, Ostend and Antwerp. Other plans followed at a rapid pace. On September 28, 1816, the first work could actually be delivered. It was work on the upper town of Charleroi. After that, the entire line was quickly in progress.

The Southern Frontier included at that time twelve fortresses. In the order that Wellington and Kraijenhoff also chose during their annual inspection trip and also in which Colonel Jones was used to report: Liège (Luik), Huy (Hoei), Namur (Namen), Charleroi, Bergen (Mons), Ath (Aat), Tournai (Doornik), Menin (Menen), Ypres (Ieper), Nieuwpoort, Ostend and Antwerp.

They worked energetically to the satisfaction of Wellington and Kraijenhoff. The king also was happy and in the process became familiar with Kraijenhoff. So much so that Kraijenhoff got the impression at the end of 1816 that his direct contact with the king had aroused jealousy with the Commissioner-General of War and with his officials. That this impression was not misplaced was revealed later. The works proceeded so well that at the end of 1818 Kraijenhoff was able to report to the king that one third of the work was ready. A completion was achieved in May 1823 and on that occasion and



impressed by the immense performance that was delivered, the king, on May 12, awarded the commanding engineers the Militaire Willemsorde.<sup>3</sup>

Wellington too, was quite content. Already on August 1871 he wrote Castlereagh: *"The king of the Netherlands will certainly have some of the finest fortresses in Europe..."*



*Militaire Willemsorde (oldest type)*

## **Sour grapes**

The size of this gigantic project had an obvious great impact on the economic and social conditions in the region. For example, roughly 1500 million bricks had to be fired and processed. There was also high unemployment in the early '20s, so that people were willing to go to work because regular unemployment benefits were not available in that time. And this process had to be managed by engineers who- in spite of their expertise – did not have any experience with works of this technical and financial scope. Expectations that many would like to profit caused the rules to be particularly sharp. All works had to be tendered publicly, transactions were recorded meticulously and the check was carried out accurately. And at the head of the organization was the Inspector-General Cornelis Kraijenhoff. A mighty man who, besides, so to speak could walk in on the king. That not only called envy but it also stimulated different people spinning intrigues. But not only at the top, but also the responsible officers at the local level could easily fall victim to gossip and slander. And defects and shortcomings were of course always there to be found. Works of this size could not be finished smoothly. Still it was an external observer, the British inspector Colonel Jones who on 10 June 1826 stated that the defects lay between limits of acceptable layers. The British signalled, however, that animosity was noticeable among the Belgians because all managerial positions were held by (Northern) Dutch people. Certain newspapers anticipated this. And every opportunity was seized.

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<sup>3</sup> The highest Dutch decoration (not at that time, but nowadays only awarded for gallantry, similar to the Victoria Cross)

Wellington knew what this was like, because he himself was a victim for quite some time of a defamation campaign carried out in newspapers and leaflets.



*Charleroi (source: French wikipedia)*

The first reason arose in early 1818. In Charleroi begin 1818 part of the brickwork collapsed. The king commissioned a special investigation and it turned out that the responsible engineers were not to blame. Also Wellington saw this as a coincidence. However, in August 1824, Kraijenhoff got concerns when receiving new messages: one of the recently built gunpowder warehouses in Ypres had collapsed. An initial investigation showed that there was a poor implementation and use of defective materials. Later also malversations and deviation from the specifications. Kraijenhoff was of the opinion that Lieutenant Colonel Engineer Lobry and Lieutenant Engineer Merkes were responsible for this accident. They were the responsible engineer officers on the spot. He advised the king to conduct further investigations to determine their precise role. The history then followed a curious course. When Kraijenhoff came back in October 1828 from an investigation into the defence of Curacao, he heard in The Hague some bad reports about Lobry. In addition he learned that a commission of the Military Supreme Court was conducting a judicial investigation in Ypres. He realized at that moment not yet that he would get involved in persona in this case.

A snowball appeared to be rolling. The people gossiped, the newspapers wrote and leaflets were distributed. There were always people who felt undervalued. And among the officers there were also those who could not resist the temptation to make their own gain. Still, it must not have been that bad in view of the standards then applicable. Of course, here and there the contractors had provided

private services for the benefit of supervising officers and, of course, in particular Lobry had been cheating, but according to British observer Jones, the reports were " ... *very greatly exaggerated* ... " and the causes " ... *most unjustly represented* ... ". About Lobry, he noted that he had been an idiot by forging payment lists and forging fake bills but that, despite suspicions to the contrary, the work generally remained in good state.



*The redoute of Fort la Chartreuse in Liège. The first two floors are Dutch; the two above were added by the Belgians.  
( photo: Steven van Valen, 2013)*

The Dutch authorities thought differently. They conducted a detailed investigation in which all stakeholders and their actions were tested against the letter of the regulations. The major suspects were Major engineers J.D. Pasteur, First engineer in Ostend, Lieutenant-Colonel engineer G.J. Lobry, first engineer in Ypres, Major-General P. Hennequin, Director in the 3rd Directorate of Fortifications and to his own surprise and dismay Lieutenant General C.R.T. Kraijenhoff, Inspector-General of Fortifications. They were quantifying in different ways. Pasteur's successor, who in the meantime had been transferred to Zutphen, noted some cracks in the new Western Fronts of the Ostend fortress, on which the investigation followed. An employee who had been fired by Lobry reported some malpractice after which Lobry was arrested. Because it was believed that also his chef Hennequin was allegedly involved in the case, he was also detained. And finally Kraijenhoff was charged with his final responsibility and indicted.

Hennequin characterized by Jones as "*now old man of little strength of mind* ", could not stand the shame and committed suicide during his arrest. The others underwent different treatment of their case.



The charge against Pasteur came in 1826 as a result of the Lobry case when a gossip and slander circuit was started. Via leaflets and newspapers messages were spread as if there would have been large scale fraudulent construction of all fortifications. Inferior materials should have been used and the soldiers involved had enriched themselves at the expense of the community. Quotation from Arnhemse Courant of 3 April 1827: "*The sad truth, however, finally breaks through the mists, in which the greed and the bad faith had favoured her*"



*The redoute of Fort la Chartreuse in Liège, cultural heritage or Nature Reserve?  
( photo: Steven van Valen, 2013)*

The official allegations related to malpractice at the the purchase of stones, having to provide private services and to administrative shortcomings. Pasteur was furthermore accused of piling with too small a pile thus causing subsidence. Moreover, he was accused of having work done in the years 1816 and 1817, with payments done in cash. This was contrary to the regulation that all work had to be put out to tender. Strangely enough, in November 1816 King William 1 had explicitly determined that "*to meet the need, which was then prevailing in the lower class, to some extent, so expensive work in day money would take place, conditions permitting*". The underlying idea was that in this way it would be possible to combat unemployment more effectively than if a contractor did not carry out the work with the smallest possible number of employees.

The authorities put in a high stake, all cases are submitted to the Military Supreme Court. All suspects were detained and a long pause followed. As said, Hennequin could not stand the shame, for the rest the judgments were not small. They were considered guilty of "*the crime of disloyalty in military administration*", and "*the crime of falsity*" and the "*crime of condoning*". For Pasteur, the judgments was honourless discharge and a one-year prison sentence (after appeal the notion of 'honourless' was revoked), Lobry was sentenced to 'dismissal from the military', 'everlasting forced labour', and 'exhibition in a public place and brands.' The king changed this judgment to 'sword over head, followed by a twenty-year prison sentence.' Finally for Kraijenhoff the verdict was 'room arrest for a two-month period' (he was later fully acquitted after appeal).

Of the accused officers, Lobry was hit the hardest. The final judgment also attracts attention in itself. Both the weight and the form and basis. The Criminal Code of 1827 had four scaffold penalties as the



most serious penalties. The third of these was 'the sword over head'. The official description was: *'Waving the sword over the head to be done to the convicted, blindfolded, and with hands bound, open neck, before a heap of sand, kneeling on the scaffold'*. This punishment has also been carried out as in the description. The Utrechts Volksblad of 2 April 1827 reports extensively. It speaks of the punishment as *"... a punishment, next to that of death ..."* And further describes in detail the execution of the sentence on the Vreeburg and also that the convicted person was taken to a 'disciplinary house' in s-Hertogenbosch. Many, including Wellington and Jones, found the punishment disproportionate. Punishment seemed deserved, but this went too far. It was thought to be influenced by public opinion and the desire to set an example.

Another aspect of the judgment was (the Penal Code was derived from the Civil Criminal Code and not to the Military Criminal Code. This, while the military judge ruled. The newspapers also wondered whether the High Military Court had been competent because there were crimes allegedly committed together with civilians. This would have been contrary to the provisions of the Provisional Instruction for the Supreme Military Court. Whatever may have been of these judgments, it became clear how necessary at that time revision of the Criminal Code and the Military Criminal Code were needed. For Kraijenhoff, this course of affairs also meant a great personal anti-climax. He was now deposited in anonymity from the king's favour. His appeal was declared well-founded and he was cleared of all blame but never regained his former position. The Minister of War and Kraijenhoff were fired and Prince Frederik arrived to head the Ministry of War. The appointment of Frederik was greeted by the Arnhems Nieuwsblad with the qualification *"equally intrepid in battle, as wise in the council's meeting"*.

## Epilogue

How did it continue with the defences and fortresses? The Southern Frontier soon lost its importance. Belgium became independent in 1839. In Europe, political relations changed and finally it turned out that a neutral Belgium formed a better buffer than a fortified border. And many a member of the Dutch House of Representatives in 1855, when the 'Special funds for the fortifications and arming of the Southern Frontier' was liquidated, the explanation given by the minister was desperately needed to understand to what purpose that Fund ever served. That is how the South Frontier came to pass as a masterpiece but also as a historical miscalculation.

Joop Westhoff

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