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**[Review of: J. van Goor (2015) Jan Pieterszoon Coen [1587-1629]: koopman-koning in Azië]**

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*Published in:*  
BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review

*DOI:*  
[10.18352/bmgn-ichr.10209](https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-ichr.10209)

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
van Netten, D. (2016). [Review of: J. van Goor (2015) Jan Pieterszoon Coen [1587-1629]: koopman-koning in Azië]. *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, 131(2), [review 26]. DOI: 10.18352/bmgn-ichr.10209

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Jur van Goor, *Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1629). Koopman-koning in Azië* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015, 575 pp., ISBN 978 94 6102 036 6).

In his own times and ever since, Jan Pieterszoon Coen has been a contentious figure in his native province of Holland and overseas. This Dutch merchant and Governor-general of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) from 1617 onwards, is frequently glorified, but more often reviled and depicted as ruthless, strict, merciless and using excessive violence.

In his recent biography *Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1629). Koopman-koning in Azië*, Jur van Goor goes to great lengths to explain Coen's reputation at home and abroad. Van Goor is nuanced, almost neutral in his judgement, placing Coen's words and deeds in his times. On several occasions the author states that violence was part of Coen's world, it was seen as a business risk, and that his ideas were not peculiar, but broadly adhered to (inter alia 120, 132, 247, 405, 409). In some instances Van Goor's diligence to explain and contextualize every action tends to look like explaining away. However, even while he can barely hide his admiration for Coen, the author always keeps a professional distance.

Despite the controversy about how to judge Coen, the only other biography is from 1934 by H.T. Colenbrander, apart from a biographical essay by Jan and Annie Romein (1938) – all in Dutch. Jur van Goor characterizes Coen as a 'koopman-koning', a merchant-king; in the first place he was a bookkeeper, but he showed leadership qualities and royal pretensions next to that, in line with the double mandate of the VOC as a trade organization with political rights (394-397). Van Goor also uses some surprisingly modern characterizations for Coen, like manager and CFO. Another important feature Van Goor attributes to Coen is his Machiavellian thinking. His Italian apprenticeship and the lessons he may have learned there are brought to the fore. Coen is presented as a man knowing his politics, his philosophy and his rhetoric. This is something not described in the earlier Coen literature.

In his last chapter Van Goor clearly summarizes the varying images of Coen in modern historiography, from a national hero and one of the founders of the Dutch Golden Age, to a historical figure receiving fierce criticism from a mostly left-wing, anti-colonial angle (although this critic did not prevent the Dutch to open a second 'Coen tunnel' in Amsterdam in 2014). Van Goor's own image is that of one of those iron men that form the core of the Dutch Golden Age. In short, Coen's faults do not affect his reputation (513, 516).

This heavy biography, counting over 600 pages, can be discouraging just by its size, and possibly also by the vastness of details and erudition Van Goor displays. According to Van Goor, Coen can be distinguished from his background only from 1614 onwards (152), the year he wrote his *Discovers*, in which he set out his scheme for what would become the VOC-empire. All the source material about Coen before this time does not even fill one page of text. Van Goor, however, succeeds in expanding this to almost 150 pages of his book. He uses many other sources to sketch the context of Coen's home town Hoorn, his family, his religion and especially his apprenticeship in Rome. Van Goor's assumptions are plausible, although he is sometimes dangerously close in elevating assumptions to facts in the next paragraph. Reading a few chapters after another, the first part of the book is irritatingly full of repetitions; some people and events are introduced several times, even using the same adjectives or expressions. This is much less the case in the later parts of the book, where Van Goor meticulously follows Coen's steps in the Indonesian Archipelago, without losing sight of the international context, especially the relations of the Dutch with the Spanish, the Portuguese, and the English. It is insightful to see how European developments and decisions influenced (military) politics in Asia, but also that the East had its own rules, dynamics and balance of power. In our simultaneous world, we should not forget that in Early Modern times distance meant time.

Van Goor tells a chronological story, only making an exception for Coen's submission of the Banda Islands in 1621. This in hindsight most controversial action of Coen, including the murder of over 10,000 Bandanese, is only discussed in chapter 13, after Coen already sailed back to Europe (in 1623) in chapter 12. Some of the remarks in chapter 13 seem to stress the exceptionality of the case, for example that only this time did Coen go ashore with his army, and that this was the only instance he permitted his soldiers to burn and destroy cities, houses and boats (445, 453). All this contributes to Van Goor's presentation of the Banda-massacre as peculiar, not really fitting in Coen's biography.

The longevity and abundance of details in the first part should not withhold interested people in and outside academia from reading this book. A strict editor might have been able to shorten and sharpen the text in some places, however, for the greater part there really is this much to tell. Firstly the importance of the Dutch role in East-Asia – for Dutch and for world history – and the sometimes heated controversy about Jan Pieterszoon Coen, justify a detailed account. A second justification for the extensiveness lies in the availability of sources. Coen has written far more than most of his predecessors or successors as Governor-general. He reformed the Dutch administration in the East, kept double entry accounts, drafted instructions and wrote dozens of letters to the Heeren XVII in his homeland. Coen carefully reported what happened, and asked for more money, more people – especially decent women – to inhabit Batavia, more ships and other resources over and

over again. Adding to that, there is Van Goor's impressive knowledge and mastery of the sources, not just regarding the lengthy VOC-archives, also Spanish, Portuguese, English and even some indigenous texts are to be found in his footnotes. This book reflects a lifelong research experience.

Van Goor's book will not prevent further discussions and controversy about Coen or the Dutch in Asia in general. However, with this book and the sources Van Goor has uncovered, presented and contextualized, discussants will be much better informed. Notwithstanding the very Dutch perspective, the global dimensions of this story also deserve to be outlined in an (abridged) English version for an international public.

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