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Michiel de Ruyter

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1607 - 1676

## Michiel de Ruyter

### Heroes of the sea and the wide reach of the Republic

The Republic was at war for a large part of the seventeenth century. In 1648, the Eighty Years' War with the Spanish came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in Munster. However, the Republic did not enjoy peace for long. Conflicting trade interests quickly led to two sea wars with England (from 1652-1654 and from 1665-1667). In 1672, the English and the French launched a combined attack on the Republic that brought it to the brink of destruction. It managed to survive, however, and in the decades that followed the Republic played an important role in the international coalition that resisted the territorial ambitions of the French king Louis XIV.

In the meantime, the administrators of the coastal provinces presented the image of the Republic as a peace-loving maritime and trade nation that only waged war with the greatest reluctance to protect its economic interests. The great

heroes in this self-made image were the admirals of the fleet and their sailors. Songs were written about them, their lives and deeds were set down in popular history booklets and major sea battles were depicted in paintings and prints. Fleet admirals who died in battle were assured of a magnificent mausoleum.

Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter is without doubt the most famous of all seventeenth-century heroes of the sea. He was born in Vlissingen in 1607, the son of a humble beer porter. From early on it was clear that his future lay on the seas. After working for some time as a rope-maker for the Lampsins, the wealthiest family of ship owners in Vlissingen, in 1618 he signed on as an orderly for the Chief Petty Officer on his first ship. It was the beginning of an adventurous life on the seas. As a privateer captain, rear admiral and merchantman he sailed the world's oceans and tried his luck.

In 1652, he believed he had acquired sufficient wealth to lead a tranquil life on shore. However, De Ruyter did not enjoy his rest for long. After the outbreak of the First Anglo-Dutch War, the Admiralty of Zeeland offered him a position. De Ruyter accepted, for one voyage. However, this soon appeared to be the start of a new career culminating in his appointment to the highest position in the navy, that of Lieutenant-Admiral.

De Ruyter's greatest moment came in 1667, at the height of the Second Anglo-Dutch War. On the urging of Grand

Pensionary Johan de Witt, De Ruyter sailed his fleet up the Thames and into the Medway, inflicting an embarrassing defeat on the English on their own soil. A large part of the English fleet was destroyed on the Medway near Chatham. De Ruyter was hailed as the new Hannibal.

In 1676, De Ruyter died in a battle against the French near Syracuse. It was to have been his last expedition. He was buried in a marble mausoleum on the spot where the high altar had formerly stood in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam.



## Sub-topics

### Primary education sector

The expedition to Chatham  
The funeral of De Ruyter  
Other heroes of the sea

### Secondary education sector

Trade wars  
Europe after the Treaty of Westphalia  
Sculpture in the Republic  
Odes  
Heroes of the sea as national symbols

### Past and Present

Upcoming commemoration of De Ruyter

### In the Treasure Chest

Model of the Seven Provinces

## References

### Places to Go

Vlissingen: De Ruyter walk  
Amsterdam: Nieuwe Kerk (mausoleum)  
Amsterdam: Maritime Museum  
Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum  
Rotterdam: Maritime Museum

### Books for young people

Joh. H. Been, *Paddeltje, scheepsjongen van Michiel de Ruyter*

### Background literature

R. Prud'homme van Reine, *Rechterhand van Nederland. Biografie van Michiel Adriaenzoon de Ruyter*, Amsterdam 1996.

### Websites

[www.deruyter.org](http://www.deruyter.org)  
[www.admiraelderuyter.nl](http://www.admiraelderuyter.nl)  
[geschiedenis.vpro.nl/dossiers/27189490](http://geschiedenis.vpro.nl/dossiers/27189490)