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Opposite: 1 Daniel van den Queecborn (attrib.), William, Prince of Orange, donated to Leiden University in 1598 by his son Maurice.
THE REVOLT IN THE NETHERLANDS has always aroused great interest in the English-speaking world. In his *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856), the American John Lothrop Motley gave a comprehensive and evocative description of the Revolt. He identified completely with the inhabitants of the Low Countries and fervently described the role of William, Prince of Orange as that of a Dutch George Washington. His romantic portrayal of the Revolt was translated into Dutch by Reinier C. Bakhuizen van den Brink, then director of the national archives. Bakhuizen van den Brink was ruthless in his criticism, however, adding countless notes to the text in which he modified or contradicted Motley’s insights and assessments. In the second half of the twentieth century, and indeed up to the present day, it was British historians like Geoffrey Parker, Jonathan Israel and Alastair Duke who had the greatest impact on the debate. Their international influence has been decisive, including on historians from the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain.

The complex power game of revolt and war in the Low Countries continues to endlessly fascinate historians, resulting in an enormous number of books and articles, both academic and popular. They examine a wide range of aspects of the conflict, political and military, religious and social, economic and cultural. They can be national or international in scope, sometimes even global. Others study the Revolt in a specific region or in one town. Unfortunately, most historians who work on the Revolt are reluctant to offer a summary for a wider, non-professional readership because they are so aware of its complexity. And yet, someone must dare to take the step. This book is aimed at those readers.

In the anniversary year 2018 – 450 years after the Battle of Heiligerlee – this introduction to the Eighty Years War (1568–1648) presents an...
overview based on the current state of historical research. It offers the latest insights in text and image. Many of the illustrations are lesser known and come from the Special Collections of the University Libraries in Leiden. The university’s website on the Revolt (http://leiden.dutchrevolt.edu) provides a platform to access or present further information.

The title of this English-language book is not *The Dutch Revolt*. That is first out of respect for the standard work by Geoffrey Parker with the same title. Second, as Parker also makes clear, the Dutch did not revolt, but were an outcome of the Revolt. Moreover, as not only Parker but also Dutch historians like Johan Huizinga and Ernst Kossmann before him have emphasized, the inhabitants of the Low Countries did not want to rise up in revolt at all. They did not consider themselves rebels and wanted only to defend the traditional system of government in which the sovereign of the land ruled in consultation with their representatives and in accordance with the rights and privileges he had sworn to respect at his inauguration. Opposition emerged only when the sovereign started to behave more and more like an absolute ruler, answerable only to God. At first, it took the form of open criticism, and then hardened into political and, later, military resistance. Many, however, remained unconditionally loyal to the king as their legitimate sovereign. Contemporaries, too, saw that the Revolt was actually a civil war, one that split towns and regions, indeed families. While in the beginning, religious persecution by the Spanish rulers drove those in favour of religious reform abroad, after the success of the revolt in the Republic, many Catholics chose exile because they wanted to practise their faith in freedom. For that reason, this book is called ‘The Revolt in the Netherlands’ and not ‘The Revolt of the Netherlands’.

It is too simple and actually incorrect to see the Revolt in the Netherlands as the Dutch war of independence. Under the lords of the Burgundian and later the Habsburg dynasties, the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries formed an autonomous, independent and personal union. For the sake of convenience, the ruler is referred to in the history books as the Lord of the Netherlands. Yet, it would be equally correct to refer to the same ruler as the sovereign of the Spanish kingdoms. Like the Netherlands, these realms were not a unified state but a personal union, consisting of Castile, León, Aragon, Valencia, Navarre and so on. Again for the sake of convenience, the ruler is known as the King of Spain. Problems arose only when Philip II, who was king of the Spanish kingdoms, also began to conduct himself as the king of the Netherlands. At
the same time, the Spaniards began to see the Netherlands as a Spanish possession. Consequently, in the Netherlands, the Eighty Years War came to be – and continues to be – seen as a struggle for freedom and independence. In Belgium, through the creation of the independent Belgian state in 1830, the myth has arisen of centuries of foreign domination, the ‘Spanish’ era being followed by an ‘Austrian’ and a ‘Dutch’ period. This myth was debunked in the early years of the twentieth century but stubbornly refuses to disappear even in the present day.

In this book, ‘the Low Countries’ or ‘the Netherlands’ refers mainly to the provinces that now make up the area of the Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) plus the current French departments of Nord-Pas-de-Calais. In actual fact, before using the word ‘Dutch’, historians should take their lead from art historians and use the terms ‘Netherlandish’ and ‘Netherlanders’ when dealing with almost the entire sixteenth century. In this book, the word ‘Dutch’ is not used until quite late on, that is, for events after 1588. The name ‘Holland’, so often used for the whole of the present-day Netherlands, is a *pars pro toto*, whereby the name of a part is used to describe the whole: the Netherlands referred to by the name of its most important county, later province. Here, I use Holland only to refer to the county/province and not the current Kingdom of the Netherlands. The same applies to ‘Flanders’. In Spanish, the war in the Low Countries as a whole has been referred to since the sixteenth century as *la guerra de Flandes*. Here, I use Flanders only for the illustrious old county, not the Flemish region in the current federal state structure of Belgium.

It was Louis-Prosper Gachard, then director of the Belgian national archives, who set a good example around 1840 by making a start on exploring and presenting the data on the Netherlands in the Spanish national archives, the Archivo General de Simancas. Many Belgians have since followed in his footsteps, while Dutch historians joined the search only in recent decades. John Lothrop Motley learned many languages, including French, Spanish, Italian and Dutch. He passionately chose the side of the rebels in the revolt against Spain. Historians from the whole world now read sources in all these languages to understand the conflicts of those years and to do justice to everyone’s standpoint and convictions.
Introduction

What It was About and Why We Need to Know

The history of the Revolt in the Netherlands, or the Eighty Years War, is a complicated story. What was the war about? Why do we need to know? And why did it last so long? To gain a clear understanding of that complex reality, it is important to identify in advance the three most important reasons for the differences of opinion that led to protest, unrest and, ultimately, war and civil war. All of the complications and points of dispute, all alliances and treaties, can be traced back to one or more of these main reasons. They were grounded in three fundamental rights that apply at all times and in all countries but which, unfortunately, are still often not always guaranteed in modern times: the freedom of religion and conscience, the right to self-determination and the right of participation.

Freedom of Religion and Conscience

The Eighty Years War became a conflict about religion, while William, Prince of Orange fought for freedom of religion. Repeatedly, negotiations on a ceasefire or peace agreement ran aground because the warring parties could not agree on the mutual and equal recognition of two or more religions. On 31 December 1564 the prince stated in the Council of State in Brussels that, though he was a good Catholic, he could not approve of princes wishing to rule over the consciences of their subjects. That was a principled stand, but also one driven by practical considerations: if Catholics, Mennonites, Lutherans and Calvinists lived alongside each other, it was ridiculous for them to be at each other’s throats. When the prince was recruiting men for the army that would win its first victory at the Battle of Heiligerlee (23 May 1568), he did so in the name of ‘liberty of religion and conscience’. That goal was achieved in January
2 The Netherlands as they were in 1555, when Charles v abdicated in favour of his son Philip II. Wall map for history lessons, Groningen, 1955.
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1579, with the inclusion in the Union of Utrecht of a provision stating that no one could be investigated, let alone prosecuted, because of their religion. That meant de facto freedom of conscience and was a major step towards achieving freedom of religion. The prince succeeded in getting religious freedom adopted, to the extent that anywhere where more than 100 heads of household asked to be allowed to practise their religion freely, they would be permitted to do so. Between 1578 and 1580 this was tried out in practice in 27 towns in the Low Countries. That is very few in modern terms but it was a lot in the context of the hard battle being fought at that time. Moreover, within a short time, the experiments failed everywhere. Tolerance had to be learned at a cost of much injustice, blood and sorrow.

The Right to Self-determination

Every community wishes to govern itself according to its own laws and freedoms, and not be subordinated to the interests of a greater whole if that means it is being discriminated against. Examples abound in today’s world. In the sixteenth-century Netherlands, many people believed that their interests were being given lower priority than those of other parts of Philip II’s large empire. They felt that they were increasingly being subordinated to the politics of the royal dynasty and were not being governed in a way that served their own interests.

The Right of Participation

Today, in democratic countries, people can make their voices heard by voting in elections and choosing their representatives. Governments are accountable to the representatives of the people. This was in principle no different in the Netherlands at that time, though that representation was organized differently. The Council of State, which advised the monarch, comprised members of the clergy, nobles and the ‘third estate’ (burghers and peasants). The representatives of these three estates formed the ‘States’ for their province, and the representatives of the States met in the ‘States General’. Together with them, the sovereign lord represented the general interests of the country. There were of course differences of opinion, but the Council and the States functioned as consultation bodies. The States had agreed with the sovereign, for example, that he would not declare war or impose taxes without their approval. The king,
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however, increasingly departed from this traditional consensus model. He believed that his power derived exclusively from God and that this allowed him to rule as an absolute monarch. In his eyes, it was the duty of the Council and the States to obey only him.

Why It Lasted So Long

Religion

The Roman Catholic Church proclaimed – and still does – that there is no salvation outside the Church. There is only one True Faith. Protestants were heretics and Muslims were unbelievers. In turn, followers of the Reformed church considered their religion to be the only True Faith and referred to Catholics as papists. And because no two Truths can exist alongside each other and the Catholic King of Spain would tolerate no other religion in his kingdom, the war lasted for eighty years.

Self-determination

The Netherlands formed an independent state consisting of seventeen provinces. Their sovereign lord was also head of state of the Spanish kingdoms: first Charles v and then Philip II. That gave rise to the misconception that the Netherlands belonged to Spain – a misunderstanding that lives on in Spain to this day. The Spanish king was the ruler of an empire and the most powerful figure in the international political arena. He made the Netherlands subordinate to his international political interests. The Netherlands, however, wished to be ruled in accordance with their own interests, in control of their own affairs, politically, militarily, economically and in matters of faith. If Spain had been willing to acknowledge the Netherlands’ right to self-determination, the king’s other domains – in the first place in Italy, but also in Spain itself – would have demanded the same status. That would have meant loss of face, of reputación, for the Spanish crown. The king could not afford to let this happen, which was another reason why the war lasted for eighty years.

Participation

Decisions were imposed on the people of the Netherlands without consultation, first by the king and then by his representative, the Duke of
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Alba. The king and his representatives ignored the Council of State, and the States General were no longer convened. The policies they imposed included Alba’s *Tiende Penning* (Tenth Penny), a tax that the Netherlands refused to pay. The followers of the Prince of Orange actually paid much more than the *Tiende Penning*, but Orange’s tax was imposed with their consent and in their own interest. Alba himself observed this with amazement. He and his successors never understood this principle – and that, too, was a reason why the war lasted for eighty years.
The arms of the Seventeen Netherlands, with Brabant as the most prominent, in the centre. Centuries later, the arms of Brabant would become those of Belgium. From Lofsang van Brabant (1580), written in French and Dutch by the poet Jan van der Noot.