

*Cardinal Granville's Memorandum on the Troubles, 1559.*

Introduction: The Emperor Charles V abdicated in Brussels in 1555 and retired in Spain. He was succeeded as King of Spain, and thus ruler of the Low Countries, by his oldest son, Phillip II. While his father had travelled widely through Europe—he was indeed more of a European than a Spaniard—the son was first and foremost a Spaniard. When the French sued for peace with Spain in 1559, Phillip II departed for Spain never to return to the Low Countries. He left his half sister, Margaret of Parma, as governor but the real power was in the hands of the Bishop of Barras, who became Cardinal Granville. Charles V had successfully held down resistance to efforts to tighten Imperial control in the Low Countries but Phillip II's more aggressive efforts at governmental centralization and the defense of Catholic orthodoxy led to increasing unrest. At first the nobles of the Low Countries had tried to persuade Margaret of Parma to drive out Granville and make the Council of State, in which they had a majority, the real government of the provinces, and to end the religious persecution of the Inquisition. By 1565, political unrest had spread to the lesser nobility and even to the common people as economic troubles raised the price of bread and produced food shortages. In 1559 he wrote a memorandum outlining the problems facing the Low Country provinces. He was particularly disturbed by the alliance between the nobility and the merchants against his government. The selection was translated by Herbert H. Rowen and published in his *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 27-29.

The First and the principal [cause] is the will of God and his infallible and irrefutable decision to punish the sin of insolence. This country was already too prosperous, so that the people were not able to resist luxury and gave in to every vice, exceeding the proper limits of their stations. The nobles wished to be adorned like kings and lived beyond their means. They sank into debt as a result and were no longer able to support themselves in the style to which they had grown accustomed; they found their resources eaten up by the interest which they owed to merchants. They could see no better way out of their situation than to change the government and avoid the authority of the courts of law, which would not be able to compel them to pay their debts. The authority of these courts had been greatly reduced by the wars, and the nobles possessed greater influence in public offices than was proper, and they gave harsh and outrageous treatment to the officers of the courts who came to enforce sentences upon them. The Bishop of Arras [Granville], seeing the harm which could ensue from such indebtedness, with the lords so much in arrears, wrote to His Majesty (as his letters will prove) that if they could be discharged of their debts for the sum of two millions, it was his opinion that his Majesty should

discharge them so as to avoid greater losses, except that he feared that they would continue their superfluous expenditures in the hope that His Majesty would always accept responsibility for paying off their very exorbitant debts, and that they would not, so far as we can see, use the ransoms of the French prisoners which they had bought from the common soldiers (a practice which in truth is improper and our good fathers in former times would not have approved), and which now amount to more than two millions, to remedy their situation but would indulge instead in even more lavish expenditure. So that we may understand how large these debts were, the Prince of Orange admitted to the late Queen of Hungary at Furnod before she left for Spain that he owed 800,000 francs, and the expenditures which he has made since in order to build his reputation and win supporters have been much larger. Merchants also made unnecessary expenditures without limit in an effort to equal and surpass the nobles and became their companions, and the nobles accepted them and paid them honor, attending their banquets and visiting their homes, in order to obtain money from them to meet their own expenses. This is why when the States General met at such an unfortunate time, the nobles and merchants reached agreement and took away the management of taxation from the financial officials and put it into the hands of the merchants. The merchants then lent money to the nobles and supplied pay for their soldiers, while making their own profit from the use of tax monies. Finally, when the soldiers became dissatisfied, this became a pretext for alienating the affection which the soldiers owed Majesty, their prince and natural Lord, and for bringing them into their own service; they made a show of compassion for them and took care of their complaints, offering aid and placing responsibility upon the king and his ministers in order to get them hated.

Great harm, especially in the matter of religion, also resulted from intercourse with foreigners, which could not be avoided because of the needs of commerce. Various Germans, Italians, Burgundians, and others among the nobles made use of the Netherlanders, turned them into dangerous men, preaching freedom to them and blinding them with a belief in their own greatness and that they did not have to accept being governed but should seek to govern themselves. No little assistance was given in opening the way to these many evils by some nobles, Spaniards and Flemings as well as others, who were brought up with His Majesty in his chamber, and who whispered into his ear that it was not proper that a prince like himself should

be given to a few persons to govern and guide him, and that it would be more fitting to establish a Council of State, formed of a goodly number of the leading nobles, who understand affairs better and would direct them so as to create greater contentment among the subjects. They even put [suspicions into his head] regarding the good Queen Mary, saying that she took it upon herself to attempt to do everything, that she wished harm to the nation, and that she could do what she wished if she remained at the head of the government of the country, and that she did not judge them according to their worth but gave her hand above all others to the Marquis de Berges and that she displayed remarkable ingratitude, for he had been brought up by her as if he were her own son, and she had given the bishopric of Liege to his brother [Robert], who had in truth little merit. But the marquis understood very well that if he governed the Lady Mary, she would enable him to achieve his harmful purposes.