

Description of the events which happened in the matter of religion in the Netherlands in 1566

Introduction: The author of this description of the religious tumult of 1566 was written by Jacob van Wesenbeke, a former Pensionary (an official) of Antwerp, who emigrated to Germany in 1567. It is from a work published in Dutch and French in 1569. This selection is from E.H. Kossmann and A.F. Mellink, eds., *Texts Concerning the Revolt of The Netherlands*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974, pp. 66-69.

All people were made to hope that the States General of the country would be called to draft a definitive and good ordinance concerning religion. Such an ordinance, intended to be really binding, to restore calm, to bring no harm to the country- and give satisfaction to the inhabitants had been awaited, longed for and yearned for by every one. Shortly afterwards the hope and the satisfaction of the population turned to sadness, hatred and suspicion, because it was discovered that at court men had secretly devised a moderation or new edict which was sent to His Majesty in Spain. And although it had been hoped that the States General would be convoked thereupon, as had been asked in the petition of the nobles² and had moreover been promised them, some persons schemed so ingeniously and successfully that it was resolved to present this moderation, not to the States General convoked for that purpose but to the provincial States of every province One after the other and, in the same order, to the provincial councils. Learning this many people feared and concluded that no good would arise from such a procedure and that things would grow worse every day, for they were far from confident that the result would come up to the hope deeply cherished by the people. No one, it was feared, would like to be subjected to such private consultation and the population continued to favour the convocation of the States General as an alternative acceptable to everybody. This suspicion, this distrust and this embitterment greatly increased and took root in people's hearts when they saw clearly, that some provincial States were ordered to meet separately (according to the aforementioned plan) in the presence of their governors or other knights of the Order or lords of high rank who were sent there to persuade them to accept the proposed moderation. Moreover, people's perplexity and despair about the results were complete when it was found that the provincial States were left so little liberty in convoking the meeting that only a few selected members were summoned and many, who also belonged there, were omitted and in several places people were even excluded

who usually attended the meetings. Moreover, discussion was almost impossible; members were not allowed the usual time or means to deliberate and consult others, and were made to swear that they would not notify anyone of the proceedings or inform any members of the councils in the towns they came from except the magistrates. In short the approval of States meeting in such circumstances was generally considered to be an extorted rather than a free and frank opinion. People who attended the discussions in the States of Artois, Hainault, Namur and Tournay know that this was the way it went.

A further important reason for scandal and discontent was the fact that the States were first convoked in the provinces which were least accustomed to show that they have some freedom and were most subject to the inquisition and the persecutions, while in the provinces which were most influenced by the novel developments, possessed the greatest privileges and had through words and deeds most boldly defended the freedom of the country, the States were not convoked at all. This was the case in Holland, Friesland, Gelderland, Luxemburg, Limburg, Zeeland, Overijssel and others (which have never been convoked since) and above all Brabant, the principal and most important province. As to the province second in importance, Flanders, this was only convoked after the State mentioned previously had met and passed judgment. And though every attempt was made to keep secret the contents of the new edict as well as the opinion of the States assembled to discuss it (which made things look even more suspicious to the common people), there were nevertheless some people who succeeded in discovering part of the truth and got to know still more about it when the States and Members of Flanders, told of the limitations prescribed for their meeting, with the utmost difficulty obtained at first four days' and later eight days' delay. And it became known that these States had given their approval to the new edict (though with some restrictions and conditions added by the secular States) without having, in the old way, convoked and heard all their members and councillors. All this caused a violent commotion among the people. Many different booklets and pamphlets were immediately written and distributed in various places arguing that the new edict was illegal, that it was no better than all the previous edicts, that the inquisition was still in force, that all this was the work of the adherents of Cardinal Granvelle, some of them mentioned by name and of the inquisitors who wanted to cause bloody disturbances, that it was done contrary to the promise made to the

nobles and to the freedom of the country, that this way of assembling the States was an innovation never before witnessed, that this could not therefore be called approval of the edict and that it was entirely null. People were earnestly exhorted to oppose it forcefully and not to allow the enemies of the country to deceive the king and the governess and to give them false information any longer but to arrest and punish them. All this was accompanied by yet more strong and violent arguments and exclamations. It proved impossible to stop the flood of publications by prohibiting them, for the more the court issued edicts against them, the more the number of such booklets and writings increased. One complained that the commonalty was deprived of its liberty to explain and to discover the truth openly, whether in the councils of the provinces and the towns or in clear remonstrances and writings, although on this depended the prosperity of the country. People wrote that these outrages would very soon have all sorts of evil consequences and suggested that the men who thus wanted to keep the king and the country in servitude, were afraid that their treachery would be revealed if the States General were convoked in the proper fashion and allowed to give their opinion freely. Soon, because of the refusal and delay in convoking the States, the commotion, embitterment and grumbling that had existed among the people before the nobles presented their petition, began anew.

This, however, was much more serious than before because the inhabitants, made much more hard-hearted and embittered by the course of events, gave up all hope of improvement and redress since the distinguished assembly and well-founded petition of the nobles as well as the promises made to them had been of no avail, and because they saw clearly that it was not the intention of the court to convoke the States General, or, if it was its intention, that there would be people to prevent it from being brought about although the meeting of the States General was considered by all sensible people to be the only remedy against the troubles. What else could be concluded when neither the supplication of the nobles, nor the desire of various provinces and towns intimated long before, nor the consent of many of the most important lords, including those who sat in the council and agreed to it and thought it necessary, had succeeded in persuading the court to do it? There seemed nothing left to give them hope that the promises given to the nobles might be kept, or that the inhabitants might be released from the hated persecutions and odious inquisition, or might be given some relief or exemption from the slavery

and servitude of their consciences which they had been enduring for such a long time. Despair made those who dissented in religion more obdurate and made them prefer to oppose the government openly and confess their belief frankly, rather than to remain forever oppressed and subdued. This was the reason why they started to hold their meetings and services each day more openly, thus getting so many more adherents. The others too now became embittered and opposed to the way in which the matter was being dealt with, and began to turn against the doctrines of the authorities who, in their opinion, were the cause of all these troubles, commotions and outrages.