

## *Iconoclasm Riots in the Low Countries, 1566*

Introduction: In the late summer of 1566, serious public disturbances broke out throughout the Low Countries. The social unrest was driven by famine conditions in many cities but quickly took the form of a wave of Iconoclasm. Calvinist ministers drew large numbers of the common people to outdoor prayer gatherings. In August of 1566 Calvinist mobs took over local churches and smashed Catholic statues, stained glass windows and paintings. Known as the *Beeldenstorm*, or image breaking, the unrest spread throughout the Low Countries and became a fundamental challenge to the governments loyal to Phillip II and the Catholic Church. Facing not only a threat to his government in the Low Countries from the nobility, but now also from the common people, Phillip II decided to crush the social unrest once and for all by sending a large Spanish army to the Low Countries led by the Duke of Alva in 1567. The excerpt below about the *Beeldenstorm* is from a Protestant history of the Reformation, Gerard Brandt, *The History of the Reformation and Other Ecclesiastical Transactions in and about the Low Countries* (1720).

The Plundering of the Churches, that dreadful Tumult, not unlike the so frequent Rebellions of the Jews, and the Storm of the Iconoclasts, or Image-breakers, that spread it self over Flanders, began in West Flanders on the 14th of August, 1566, the day which preceded the great Festival of the Papists, the Ascension of the Virgin Mary.

Some few of the vilest of the Mob, to whom several Thieves and Whores had joined themselves, were those that began the Dance, being halloed on by no body knows whom. Their arms were, Staves, Hatchets, Hammers, Ladders, Ropes, and other tools more proper to demolish than to fight with; some few were provided with Guns and Swords. At first (being emboldened by the absence of the Count of Egmont, the Governour of that Province, who had been called to Court by the Regent the Lady Margaret) they attacked the Crosses and Images that had been erected in the great Roads of the Country; next, those in Villages; and lastly, those in the Towns and Cities: All the Chapels, Churches, and Convents which they found shut, they forced open, breaking, tearing, and destroying all the Images, Pictures, Shrines, and other consecrated things they met with: nay, some did not scruple to lay their hands upon Librairies, Books, Writings, Monuments, and even the dead bodies in Churches and Churchyards. Swift as lightning the evil diffused it self, insomuch that in the space of three days above four hundred Churches were plundered. In some places the Magistrates themselves pulled down the Images, to prevent the Mob from doing the same; whereupon, when they valued themselves for their foresight in this

matter, the President Viglius told them, that ... they had been wisely mad. In other places, this wild rage of the Mob was curbed by power and prudent order . . .

The Government of Antwerp mistrusting that in the absence of the Prince of Orange, who had been just then summoned to Brussels to the Regent, the storm against Images might blow likewise that way, the rather because of the Fair-time, and the number of strangers that resorted thither, they caused the Image of the Virgin Mary (which otherwise used to be exposed for a week together on that occasion) to be removed from the body of the Church into the Choir, that it might give no offence. But their good intentions produced bad effects, and their care for the publick peace was perverted to publick tumults; for the Mob observing the fears of the Government, began to grow insolent; and some of them, in a sarcastical way, asked the Image, whether her fright had driven her so far from her post? and whether she would join in crying, *Vive les Gueux*, &c.? A parcel of young Lads playing about the Pulpit, one of them went into it, and began to mimick the preaching of the Monks and Priests; some were for hearing, others for pulling him down, but he defended himself with his feet against them, till at last a young Schipper went and threw him down headlong. The Men espoused the Boy's quarrel, and one of them wounded the said Schipper with a Dagger. After much ado, by the intervention of the Scout, and the Officers that belonged to the Church, the Mob was prevailed upon to clear the place, and the doors were immediately shut, and so remained that day.

The Magistrates, (whether it was that their courage and prudence forsook them at that juncture) tho' they had the whole night following to consider what they should do, could resolve upon nothing to stifle the smoking Embers of Mutiny. Nay, they even neglected to feel the pulse of the Citizens and Militia whether they were inclinable to stand by them against these insolences which threatened the quiet of the Government. However, they were not wanting to signify the importance of this affair to the Prince of Orange their Governour, and to desire his advice; they also informed him, how Herman Modet, and others of the Protestant Teachers, had upon the same day declaimed against Idols, saying, That they ought to be removed from our sight, as well as from our hearts.

The next day the Mob gathering in and about the aforesaid Church, the Contentions relating to our Lady began afresh. An old woman sitting before the Choir to sell Wax-Tapers,

and to receive Oblations, began to scold at the people, and throw ashes and filth at the boys, provoked, it may be, at their telling her that those wares began to be out of fashion, and that it was high time to shut up shop. The Officers of the Church seeing that as the Mob increased the quarrels did so too, endeavoured to clear the Church of them, and to shut it up, but no body minded them. The Scout, and the Civil Magistrates, being informed of these disorders, repaired to the said Church, and admonished the people to leave it, as some did, but others pretended, that they had a mind to stay and hear the Hymn of Salve Regina; these were told, that there would be none that day; whereupon they replied, They would then sing it them selves; and accordingly one was heard to begin a Psalm or Hymn in one corner of the Church, others in another, and the people echoed to them. Some of the young fellows had the confidence to play at ball, others to kick stones about the Church, and even to throw them at the Altars.

These were the preludes of greater evils. Some thought, that if the Magistrates left the Church, they might draw or carry away the Mob after them; therefore the Burgomasters repaired to the Council Chamber; but finding they could do nothing by fair means, they resolved to raise the Militia, and disperse the people by force. In the mean time they caused the Church doors to be shut, all but one wicket, to let out the remainder of the people; and the Scout having laboured to dismiss those that stay'd without, went again into the Church, and endeavoured, together with some others of the Magistrates, to clear the place, but was opposed by some of the Ringleaders with stern countenances and rebellious language. In the meanwhile, a great Mob rushed in at the little Gate, and the Scout was forced to quit the Church. The moment he was gone, they fell to singing Psalms with open throats. The Treasurer, and other Officers of the Church having secured the Holy Reliques and other Trinkets, fled after him. Then all the rest of the Rabble that were without, forced their way in, and broke open all the doors; wherefore the Scout and other Magistrates went thither again, but being terrified at the numberless concourse of people, and the shouts and noise that echoed from the Church, they retired immediately to the Stadthouse, thinking themselves very happy if they could save that; which did not remain unthreatened. In the mean while the Rabble was everywhere up, the Burghers houses and shops all shut, and as the Sun declined, the breaking, robbing and plundering increased.

The Virgin's Image, that had been carried about in procession but two days before, was

the first sacrifice to their fury. The Chapel in which it stood was entered by force, and the Idol thrown down and dashed to pieces, all the people roaring, *Vive Le Gueux*, and demolishing all the Crosses and Images that were in their way. Hurried on by the same fury, and reinforced by fresh numbers, they flew to other Churches, Chapels and Cloisters, where they did not mishandle stocks and stones only, but living creatures too, among them the Franciscans fared the worst. They broke open Chambers and Cellars; staved all the barrels, and set the beer and wine a running. There was a Carmelite, or bare-footed Monk, that had reason thankfully to remember their pranks as long as he lived; for they delivered him from a prison to which he had been confined about twelve years. Neither did they spare the prisons of the Civil Magistrate; releasing several out of them. They likewise forced the Convent of Nuns; who fearing worse things, made their escape, and retired to their friends, abandoning their Lodgings to the fury of the Mob....

At day-break, these destroyers of Images sallied out of the Town, and fell to plundering the Abbey of St. Bernard, and other, Religious houses round about, sparing none that were in their way or sight; whilst those of their Gang that staid within made an end of all that remained there. Three days this epidemical rage lasted, which grew up to this height of insolence through the cowardice of the Magistrates. Add to this, an incident which made the Mob yet more bold: Some people of quality and estates, armed with pistols and daggers under their cloaths, mixing with them and lurking in corners and by-places of the Town, terrified all that were inclined to oppose them; overpowering the Watches kept by the Inhabitants. Besides, the chiefest of these durst not exert themselves; such as were Papists, suspecting that the Protestants had unanimously plotted their ruin, durst not stir for fear of being fallen upon: And on the other hand, the Protestants fearing these disorders would be revenged upon them, thought they did enough in keeping a watchful eye on the Romanists. In one thing however they all agreed, viz. in keeping the Rabble out of their houses and from their coffers; and accordingly the Roman Catholicks of the Low Countries have since been often reproached by the Spaniards, with having had more regard to their own Temporal concerns than to the interest of the Church and Religion.