

## The Revolt of The Netherlands and the Creation of the Dutch Republic

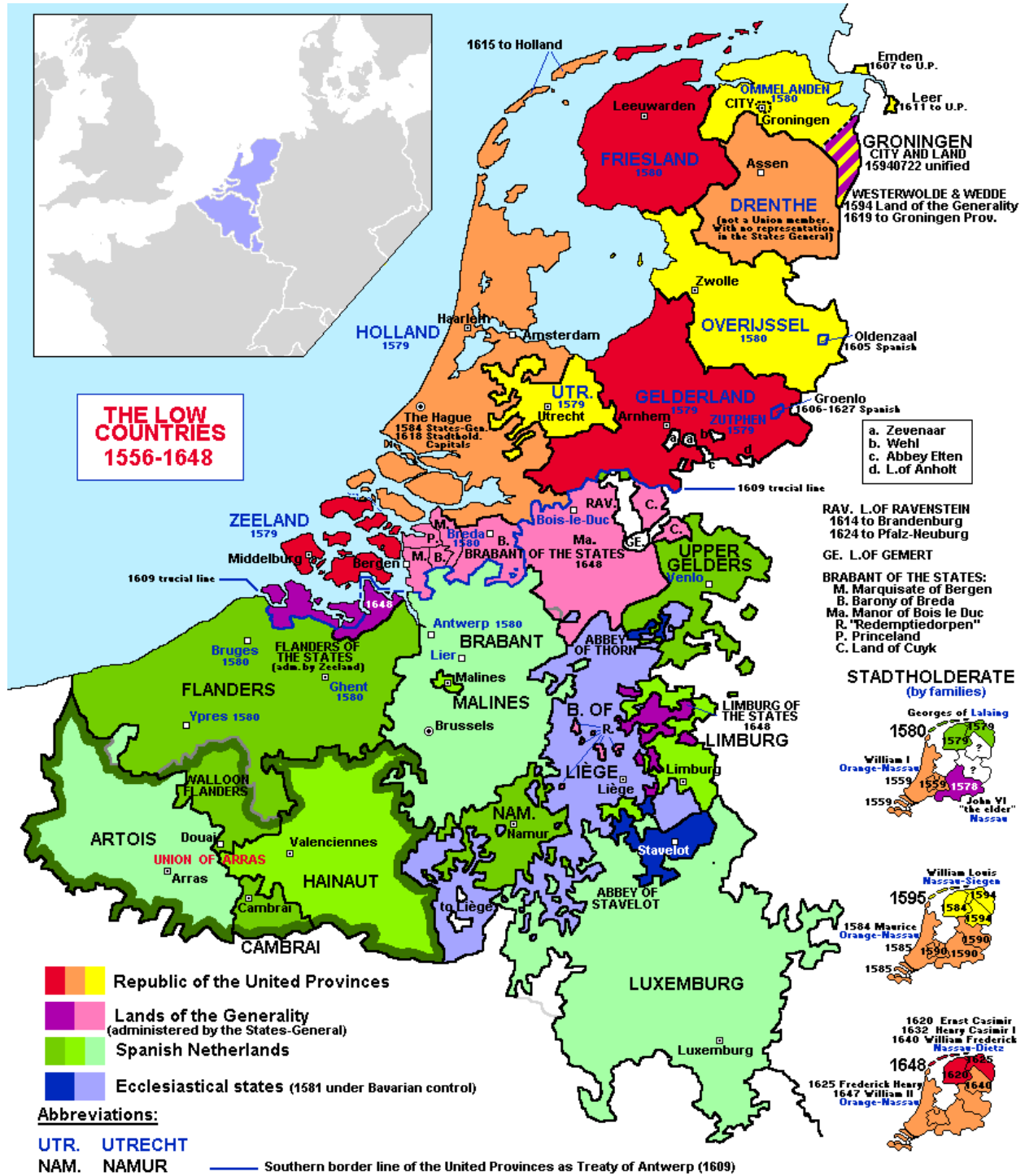
Gerard M. Koot

The region of Europe known as the Low Countries, which today approximately constitutes the geographical area of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, played a crucial economic, political and cultural role in Europe, and, indeed, an important role in world history, from the late middle ages until the French Revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The economic success of this region was greatly enhanced by the fact that the region constituted Europe's greatest delta through which flowed three of the most important rivers of Western Europe out to the seas—the Rhine, the Scheldt and the Meuse. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this region had replaced Northern Italy as the most important center of commerce, trade and manufacturing in Europe, with Antwerp as its most important financial center. By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, partly as a consequence of the political revolt within the Low Countries, Europe's economic leadership passed to Amsterdam and the Northern region of the Low Countries in what would become the Republic of the United Provinces, and what is today known as the Netherlands. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, European economic leadership passed to London and the United Kingdom, but the Low Countries, which had been divided into the Dutch Republic and the Austrian Netherlands (roughly modern Belgium) as a consequence of their revolt against Spain, remained a wealthy and advanced European economic area. Although Spain and Portugal had been the first to create a world-wide trade network across the oceans, it was North-Western Europe, centered around the North Sea, which gained the greatest long-term economic benefits from international trade and its imperial connections. Western Europe as a whole retained its world economic leadership until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the fact that the economic success of the Dutch during the early modern period took place in a Republic, was of great interest at the time, and had a considerable influence on the development of a constitutional government in Britain and upon the development of democratic political ideas more generally, in what has been called the 'Radical Enlightenment.' This combination of economic and political innovation has led many historians to suggest that there was a natural affinity between early modern European economic success and representative government.

During the late Middle Ages the dukes of Burgundy attempted to construct a wealthy new state out of their scattered territories. While their court was in Burgundy in eastern France, their wealth was largely in the Low Country provinces. Early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Burgundian territories passed to the Hapsburgs, whose possessions included territory in Germany, southeastern Europe, Italy, Spain, and the Spanish Empire in Asia and the New World. It was during the reign of the Habsburg prince Charles V, who became the Holy Roman Emperor in 1519, that an effort was made to provide the Low Countries with more centralized political, financial and judicial institutions. Charles was born in Ghent in 1500 but did not feel a particular loyalty to the traditions of local, decentralized and varied political institutions of the Burgundian state he inherited. Instead, he professed to rule in the name of Christianity and his Roman Catholicism, which was being challenged by various Protestant groups during his reign. By 1543, after a period of bitterly fought military campaigns, he had added the provinces of Gelderland, Friesland, Utrecht, Overijssel, and Groningen to his Burgundian inheritance of Holland and Zeeland, which together would constitute the seven provinces of the later Dutch Republic. Already in 1531 he placed a central administration above the local and provincial governments of the provinces. His government in these lands was headed by a Governor-General, advised by Councils. Control over the provinces was increased by the appointment of lieutenants to the Governor General, called Stadholders (*stadhouders* in Dutch). In 1548 Charles gave the Low Countries a special status as a separate country within the Holy Roman Empire, the Burgundian Circle, consisting of the seven provinces already mentioned and ten other entities, among which the most important were Flanders, Brabant, Hainaut, Namur, and Luxemburg. Charles further provided a 'pragmatic sanction,' which guaranteed that this new political entity, which was legally but very loosely tied to the Germany, could only be inherited as an indivisible political unit (see the map below).

Although during his reign Charles favored the commercial and industrial interests of the Burgundian Netherlands, he had little patience with the traditions of particularism and rebellion, which had been characteristic of its cities, and especially those of Flanders. In 1539-40, for example, he crushed a rebellion in Ghent and deprived it of local government and privileges. Nonetheless, Charles V should not be seen as an absolute ruler. He did not abolish its local

assemblies or the States General, but instead sought to work with them through persuasion whenever possible. All this changed in 1555, when Charles V retired and his lands were divided between his brother, who became the Holy German Emperor, and his



son, who became Phillip II of Spain. Phillip II returned to Spain soon after becoming King and never returned to the Netherlands. His half-sister, Margaret of Parma was appointed Governor-General and Cardinal Granville served as the effective executive of the country. Granville ignored the advice of the Council of State, the majority of whose members consisted of the great nobles of the country's provinces, such as the Dukes of Egmont and Hoorn, and the Prince of Orange. King Philippe secured the Papacy's support to reorganize the Catholic hierarchy in order to more effectively repress the growing number of Protestant dissenters. All this diminished the authority, prestige and wealth of the local nobility, which generally had good ties to the local population. Bad harvests in the 1560s led to high unemployment and a rise in the price of bread, the staple food of the population. In 1566 the great nobles refused to continue to serve on the Council of State since their advice had always been ignored. Their revolt was soon taken up by the lesser nobility, the general population in some cities, and Calvinist heretics who smashed sacred images in many churches (the famous and frightening *beeldenstorm* or Iconoclasm). Granville and Spanish troops were removed from the country and religious persecution was abated in order to prevent a full-fledged revolt. This 'Compromise of 1566' was rejected by Philip II. In 1567 he removed Margaret of Parma as Governor-General and sent the Duke of Alba with a powerful Spanish army to once and for all subdue the troublesome Netherlanders.

Alva and his army quickly defeated the rebels and the heretics. The Prince of Orange, known as William the Silent, put up a brave resistance but his forces were no match for the much larger and well trained Spanish forces. Alva created a 'Council of Troubles,' which punished the rebels, including the execution of two of the most important rebel nobles, the counts of Egmont and Hoorn. By 1570 Alva had more or less suppressed the revolt. In order to pay for his troops he attempted to impose the Spanish 'tenth penny, tax, a levy of 10% sales tax on all but land. Alva's victory, however, turned out to be short lived. In 1572 a motley group of Geuzen, or Sea Beggars variously seen as privateers, pirates, or heroes of the Dutch Revolt, who were only nominally under the leadership of William of Orange, captured the fortified seaport town of Den Briel (in south-west Holland near Rotterdam). The Sea Beggars along with militant Calvinists proceeded to quickly overthrow the Catholic and loyalist governments put in place by Alva in one town

after another in Holland and Zeeland, with the exception of Amsterdam and Middelburg. At the same time, William of Orange and his modest forces returned to Holland from his exile in Germany. At a meeting in Dordrecht in July of 1572, the Provinces of Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht and Friesland named William of Orange Governor-General and Stadholder. In 1573 Alva was replaced by Don Luis des Requesens, but he also failed to put down the revolt. Faced with expensive wars with France and with the Ottomans in the Mediterranean, and harassed by English and Dutch pirates at sea, who captured many of his ships carrying bullion from the New World, Spain was forced into declaring bankruptcy in 1575. In 1576 a mutinous Spanish army sacked Antwerp in what became known as the 'Spanish Fury,' which cost over 8,000 lives and reinvigorated the revolt in the Southern Netherlands. In 1576 the Provinces of the Netherlands signed the Pacification of Ghent, which promised to drive the Spanish army from the Netherlands, establish religious toleration, and unite the Provinces under one government headed by William of Orange in conjunction with the States-General in Brussels. The latter was to consist of representatives from all the Provinces of the Netherlands.

However, Philip II was unwilling to concede his power to William of Orange and the States-General and now sent his half-brother, Don Juan of Austria, to rule the Netherlands. It soon became apparent that the provinces could not agree to common policies. The Calvinists in Holland and Zeeland were not willing to accept the principle of toleration for Catholics, while Catholics objected to the unequal treatment of their religion and were unhappy with the leadership of William of Orange. In 1578, Don Alexander Farness, later the Duke of Parma, who had been sent to lead the Spanish army in the Netherlands, replaced Don Juan and proceeded to drive the rebels north across the great rivers. Unable to defeat the rebels in the North, he sought to win over the loyalty of the Catholics in the South, who had become increasingly opposed to a militant Calvinists who had refused all compromise. In 1579, the southern counties of Artois, Hainaut and Walloon Flanders (most of the latter is in what is now France) left the rebel alliance, signed the Union of Arras, and proclaimed their loyalty to Philip II. In response, the Provinces of Holland, Zeeland, Guelders, Groningen, Brabant and Flanders (maritime Flanders on the Scheldt estuary) signed the Union of Utrecht. In the Act of Abjuration of 1579 the Northern Provinces declared that Philip II had failed to live up to his responsibilities as their king and they formally

rejected his authority. While the Revolt of the Netherlands was not legally settled until 1648 with the signing of the Peace of Munster between the Republic of the United Provinces and Spain, the *de facto* independence of the Northern Provinces, which called itself the United Provinces, was set in motion with the Union of Utrecht and had been achieved largely by 1588, when England and France recognized their independence. Spain partially recognized the republic's independence by signing a truce with the United Provinces in 1609.

The revolt of the Netherlands thus resulted in the end of the Burgundian dream to create a new kingdom in North-Western Europe between France and Germany as well as the Hapsburg project of a united Netherlands. Instead the Southern Provinces, considerably diminished during the 17<sup>th</sup> century by French expansion, became an entity ruled by the Spanish and by the Austrians after 1713. While the Spanish had retaken Antwerp in 1585, their intolerance towards Protestants and Jews, and the closing of the Scheldt, Antwerp's outlet to the sea, by the United Provinces, saw the mass migration of much of its capital, commerce, and skilled labor to the north. The Southern Netherlands lost its political privileges and the local aristocratic and patrician forms of government. Instead, it was ruled by foreign princes and became almost exclusively Catholic. It also lost its role as a European center of trade and its once pre-eminent manufacturing industries declined. While it remained a relatively prosperous society, its wealth became increasingly dependent upon its progressive and prosperous agriculture until well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century when its industries again began to grow. Ironically, it was the South, now known as Belgium, which was the first country to industrialize on the Continent in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The North, by contrast, began a period of unprecedented economic growth, which made it the richest state in Europe based upon its near monopoly for much of the 17<sup>th</sup> century of Europe's carrying trade, the development of Amsterdam as Europe's financial center, the growth of a large and diverse manufacturing sector, the largest fishing industry in Europe and a innovative and prosperous agriculture. Militarily it was one of three or four European great powers, especially at sea but also on land, during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Culturally, it was a relatively open and tolerant society, with a vibrant intellectual life in both the arts and sciences, and the home of one of the great European traditions in painting and decorative arts. Although it became a Republic, that was not the intention of its original leaders. During its early years it had cast about for a new

sovereign who would be willing to recognize the rights of aristocrats, patricians, cities, provinces and churches and share in governing the new state. William of Orange never accepted the division of the Netherlands, nor advocated the creation of a Republic. He was, however, assassinated in 1584 by an agent of Philip II. Failing to find a suitable sovereign, the United Provinces settled on becoming a republic and choose its Stadholders from descendants and the family of William of Orange. Throughout the two centuries of the Republic's existence there was a constant tension between the champions of executive power of the Princes of Orange and a strong central government and political leaders who preferred more overt republican and federal forms of authority. Historians and political scientists have long debated whether the government of the United Provinces was primarily an aristocratic and patrician decentralized Republic, which harked back to late Medieval and Renaissance models, or an important forerunner of later forms of representative government. Whatever the answer to this question, the Dutch Republic was not democratic. While it was very complex, it was probably not very efficient. It did provide, however, a good deal of freedom of expression, encouraged local autonomy, provided for the participation of all those with some social prestige and wealth in some level of government, or to at least have its interests represented, so that the government was able to establish itself as a powerful fiscal-military state, which was able to protect the power and wealth of society for two centuries. While the power and wealth of the Republic declined relative to its larger neighbors, and its economic pre-eminence passed to the United Kingdom during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it remained a wealthy country while retaining the legal and social inequalities of old regime Europe. The Dutch Republic was widely admired for almost two centuries and did not collapse from internal discord, but was swept away by the French Revolution and Napoleon.