

Rebellion in Ghent, 1539

Introduction: The city of Ghent, an important textile manufacturing and trading center in Flanders, had a rebellious history in medieval times. In 1539, when officials of Charles V imposed a tax without their consent, they rose up to protect their privileges against the centralizing efforts of the government. Forces loyal to Charles V crushed the rebellion. This account of the rebellion was written by an anonymous resident of Lille who was a loyal supporter of Charles V and argued that patricians of the town had used the discontent of the poor in an attempt to maintain their own authority. The excerpt 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. 17-25.

Although peace, that great boon for the whole country, had just been made between the Emperor, our Lord, and the King of France, the Ghenters continued to keep close watch night and day in all the streets and quarters of the town, in the civic guards' quarters and in the various guild-houses. Everyone armed himself as if there existed an open war in the Low Countries directed only against them, as if the enemy had invaded Flanders and laid siege to the town of Ghent.

To hear them talk and see them strut around, it seemed that they were not afraid of anyone anywhere who wished to cause them harm, no matter how great he was, nay, they were not even afraid of their own prince. These were the very words, or very close to them, spoken by many of the rabble and the burghers, young and old alike but mainly the youths, who are always quicker and bolder in speech than their elders. They defended whatever they said and did with petty arguments: they would act properly and justly and establish law and order in this town of Ghent, in the county of Flanders and then in all the other provinces of the Netherlands. The wicked rebels and rascals told the simple good people that better times would come, there would be more business and jobs in the country and the city, and goods would sell better than before or at the time, and that as a result of these and other measures, everything would sell at lower prices and therefore the people would live better and with greater freedom than they had had. The simple folk in Ghent and the surrounding districts gladly lent their ears, for' they had always wanted freedom and were ready to believe that it would be achieved right away. But the wicked men had something quite different in mind, the very opposite of what they told the simple, good

people. They did not think about what would result from their deeds but hoped only that they would bring better times; whereas those wicked rebels desired only a pretext to bring the rabble, whose only purpose was pillage, into the city and district of Ghent. Nonetheless, misled by what they had been told and hoping for better times, everyone in Ghent was ready to support these wicked men, knowing nothing of their purposes but believing and hoping that everything would turn out well. Moved by this hope, the Ghenters behaved as if they were the princes and lords of the county of Flanders who had only to say, "We want it," to have something done. And they did things contrary to the authority and supremacy of the Emperor in his capacity as Count of Flanders, who was their good prince and sovereign lord. A number of captains of the common people began to take the lead in Ghent. They sent some of their number with letters to other towns in Flanders, exhorting and inciting them not to pay their share of the contribution of four hundred thousand gold guilders but instead to join with them and to enjoy every advantage. There was no need to be afraid, they wrote, because the Ghenters would protect them against everyone.

The cities of the region were persuaded by the Ghenters' fine words and promises. Some, like Courtrai, Audenarde, and others, where great divisions and disturbances also occurred, listened and followed Ghent. Other towns which had no pretext of disorders listened to the Ghenters but waited to see whether they succeeded before they themselves acted. This also happened in a number of smaller towns. Indeed, the whole county of Flanders was then quite ready for riot and rebellion. The Ghenters had them take a count of their men and distributed them into civic guards, including men too old to do much. The Ghenters and those who joined them placed their confidence wholly in the force and strength of the civic guards, for there were great numbers of people in the Low Countries who had wanted nothing more than to become members of these companies, which would have been a great pity if they had been able to get in. But God in his mercy took his measures and did not permit it. . . .

[Description of the arrest and death of several leading burghers in Ghent at the hands of the rebels.]

It was around this time that the Ghenters, in their wicked folly, tore into a thousand pieces an ordinance and statute issued by the Emperor as Count of Flanders in the year 1515, in

accordance with the Peace of Cadzand, which was called the *cbalfvel* (which in our language means "calfskin") because it was written on parchment, and was signed by His Majesty's own hand and sealed with his great seal. Among other things it strictly prohibited the holding of any illegal assemblies likely to result in disturbances, or even to speak such words as could create disorder, under pain of major punishments stated at length in the said ordinance. The rebels in Ghent wanted to destroy and nullify this ordinance because it specifically forbade the wicked things they were doing and wished to do, and because they did not wish to be contradicted in anything but only to hear their own mad and evil fancies, for there was no reasoning with them. This is why this ordinance brought out into the open the great wrath, chagrin, and ill-will directed not only against the Queen Regent⁴ who governed the Low Countries for her brother, the Emperor, and against provincial governors and the members of her council, but also, as it appeared, against their count himself, who had issued the statute, for they put its pieces in their caps to wear, and they at once proclaimed that the statute and ordinance was henceforth void and would not be enforced, for it was not to their interest and they had violated it so gravely. . . .

Many good and notable burghers, gentlemen, officials of the Emperor, merchants and other worthy men of the city of Ghent, seeing that things were going very badly and likely to get even worse, got away as best as they could manage, but not without great peril to their lives, and their property was seized at once; but they preferred to lose their possessions in the city rather than run such danger every day from wicked men and see and hear the suffering. For there was no order or control over the common people, nor any justice save what they wanted and intended. . . .

The Emperor, who was living at this time in his kingdom of Spain, was informed by the Queen, his sister, of what was happening in Ghent, where he had been born about forty years before. His Majesty had already been informed several times of the refusal of the Ghenters to pay their share and quota in the grant to His Majesty of 400,000 gold guilders. The Emperor had written sealed letters to them about this several times but they disregarded them completely. He was also informed that the Ghenters wished to contribute soldiers from their city instead of paying their contribution in money, to which His Majesty would not consent. Whenever he

received such information, he had always written to the Queen to tell her what he wanted done in this affair, for it was of the greatest importance, for whatever the Queen had done had been by His Majesty's command. There were other good reasons to act, for these were things of great importance and consequence. When the latest reports came, the Emperor again sent sealed letters to his people of Ghent, in which His Majesty ordered them explicitly to restore peace, to hold no assemblies, and to cause no disturbances or do any other things which might displease him, and to obey the Queen, his sister, on pain of incurring his indignation and receiving heavy penalties. If they did not do so, he would take measures which would cause them much sorrow and which they would never forget. As you shall hear, this is indeed what His Majesty was to do when the time and place came. The Ghenters paid little or no attention to these letters or these threats, acting like men without understanding who did not think ahead to what would come of their deeds and what would happen to them. They believed that there was no prince strong enough to defeat them and reduce them to obedience. They even refused to believe that these letters came from the Emperor, but said that the Queen had written them in His Majesty's name so as to shake and frighten them. Many believed this and hence paid no account to these letters

[Description of the unsuccessful mission of Adriaen de Croy, Count of Roelux, to Ghent on the Emperor's behalf, in late October and early November, 1539.]

Soon after the departure of the Count of Roelux from Ghent, where he saw that there was no good reason to hope for the situation to improve and because he feared for his own safety, the Ghenters renewed their disorders. Their riotousness was now even worse than before. Things went so badly in the town that for a time it was forbidden to ring the bells for the workers and no one opened shop, so that it seemed like High Easter in the town, with all the houses and stores closed. This' caused extraordinary fear among the good people who were still in the city. Most of them wished that they were thirty leagues away, even if they could have only half of their possessions but had their wives and children and families with them, for they were every day in great peril of losing all their possessions and their lives too, which mattered most. They were never safe, day or night, and were in continual fear. Everyone kept his ears open and good guard in his house. It was a very piteous time. May God protect us every one from such things, for a people in rebellion is a very great danger. But when the Emperor came, a great change occurred .

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The disorders began among the common people at the instigation of these burghers, who told them many things that were not true and aroused them about different matters which the common people would never have thought of by themselves and who would not say and do the things they did without the complicity of well informed people. It is an evil thing to arouse a people, for they do not settle back to peace when one desires. It is more important to keep a people at peace than to arouse it, for the fury of a people is no little thing and one should be on one's guard against it. But these burghers and rich men did not believe that these disorders would turn against them as happened, with threats to their lives and the looting of their wealth which was the intention of all the poor commoners. Some of these poor men did not even remain still as they walked the streets but when they met rich men told them in great envy and hatred: "On your way! The time is near when we will own your wealth in our turn. You have been wealthy enough and will be poor like us in your turn. You will know what it is to be poor and we will know what it is to be rich and to wear your fine robes, and you will wear ours, which are shabby and cheap." And they said other similar insults to the rich men, who thereupon decided to be silent and patient and speak meekly, for otherwise they were in great danger of their lives.

And when these burghers of Ghent saw that matters had come out this way and were going so badly, they greatly repented that they had put these common people in the position which they now had and they would have gladly taken it away from them if they had had any way to do it. But now it was too late, for the people had gone too far in their rebellion and had become the complete masters of the city. It was impossible to take power from them, for they wanted to know everything and to have an accounting for everything, even of many things which had happened in the city thirty years before, and of many other affairs which they searched out from the past and brought forward without any foundation or reason. Whatever they thought of, they wanted done; it did not matter whether it was good or evil. Some burghers rescued their best furnishings and records from the city of Ghent as best they could, but only with great difficulty and danger of losing everything, even their lives, which is the main thing. A close guard had been put on the city to prevent such movements, and it was strictly forbidden to transport any goods outside the city, and even burghers who lived outside in country houses were ordered to

return to the city with all their goods. Those who came back were few, which was wise, for those who were able to escape with their goods did so and those who could not remained in very great danger. Some hid their goods in the ground and other secret places as best they could, while others were so frightened and at their wit's end that they hardly knew what they were doing and did not rescue anything, but were so surprised that they took no steps to save any of their things; some have even died since as a result of their fears and repeated attacks of curdled blood, with its attendant grave maladies. It was a sorry time: may God in his mercy save each and all of us from the likes of it!

These burghers had believed that this upheaval would turn out quite differently, according to their own purposes and dreams, and enabling them to accomplish aims which were not at all good. God therefore permitted events to turn out exactly contrary to their hopes, with great pain, damage, and even with danger to their lives. Thus, thinking to take revenge on others, they failed to accomplish their wicked purposes and the revenge turned upon themselves; as usually happens to those who plot the fall of others, they themselves had a fall. But, despite its bad beginning, this upheaval ended rather mercifully, for that Tuesday passed without bloodshed, which was the work of God, who had pity upon his people thanks to the prayers of some good persons, churchmen and laymen, of whom there are many in the city of Ghent. They too were in great danger from the wicked men who went about daily in bands and squads and made great threats against them and compelled them to give a part of what they demanded, which was food and drink and sometimes money; and the same thing was done to the burghers and the rich, which greatly vexed one and all, for no one gladly gives away what is his own under duress. They therefore repented of their earlier foolish opinions which had come down to them from father to son, and also of having gradually aroused the common people and having enabled them to do harm. For now they saw that everything had turned against them, quite contrary to what they had wanted, and they might not just lose their property but were in great peril of their lives, for this was what the poor common folk were moving toward.

And for these reasons and to avert all other dangers, these burghers and rich men, with the entire government and others, thereupon joined the party of the Emperor, at the side of his adherents and the men of good will. . . . And after that day, the rebels ceased to be as bold as

before and began to quiet down a little and be more moderate, which was a great boon to the whole city as it awaited the arrival of the Emperor. . . . And after that day the burghers and worthy men began to play the master more audaciously than they had done before and the rebels began to subside, and each drew to its own side and made excuses to the others. This was a good beginning for the worthy men, who nonetheless did not fail to stay on the alert and keep close watch in their houses, ready for action if the need arose, and thus they began to regain sway and courage. The reason that these burghers and the like showed themselves now to be good adherents of the party of their prince was more fear for their lives and the loss of their goods than good will toward him, which they had scarcely ever shown before. . . .

[The decision of the Emperor to return to the Low Countries to take charge of affairs in person is described, then his trip across France as the guest of King Francis I, and his arrival at Valenciennes, in the Netherlands. The Ghenters, fearing what he would do, sent a delegation to him, which he received harshly. He then went to Brussels, en route to Ghent, where he made his entry of February 14, 1540, New Style.]

The Emperor entered this city of Ghent with his train at the beginning of Lent in the year 1539 [Old Style]. The entry lasted more than six hours, apart from the transport of supplies, which had begun some days before, lasted all that day and continued for several more days. Those who entered the city were eight hundred men-at-arms of the Netherlands troops (which, with the archers included, amounts to from three to four thousand horse), all carrying their lances at the ready; and four thousand German infantry, almost all properly equipped, pikemen with the pikes on their shoulders, halberdiers with their halberds, and the remainder harquebusiers, each with his harquebus in his hand along with everything else needed to use it. These troops, both infantry and cavalry, were all ready and equipped for combat if the need arose. With them came the Emperor, accompanied by many cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and other great ecclesiastical lords and princes, as well as many great princes, dukes, marquesses, counts, barons, grandmasters, and lords, as well as most of the knights of his Order of the Golden Fleece and others, and a very great number of noblemen from every quarter and country, Spain, Naples, Sicily, Italy, Germany, as well as the Netherlands and other lands where His Majesty held sway, along with various ambassadors from our Holy Father the Pope, the kings of France, England,

Portugal, and Poland, as well as from many princes of the Empire and Italy, and from the republic of Venice and other countries, provinces, and potentates; and there were also the members of His Majesty's household and his domestic officers, with the archers of his bodyguard and the halberdiers of his guard, on good mounts and well armed.

The Emperor, entering his city of Ghent in such company, with such might and on such a footing, greatly astounded and frightened the inhabitants. There was much reason for it, for this was not an Entry, which gave them much pleasure but one of fear and sadness. The Entries which His Majesty had made before had not been made with such might and force but were all friendliness and pleasantness. Nevertheless the Ghenters performed their duties in the usual fashion. The members of the two benches of government, the grand dean, the dean of the weavers, the burghers and other notables and commoners of the city, went with all reverence and humility to greet the Emperor as their count, in the manner in which this had always been done, welcoming His Majesty into his city of Ghent and presenting him with its keys. . . .

[Military measures of the Emperor, followed by a delay in his announcement of the city's punishment until the arrival of his brother Ferdinand, his elected successor as emperor. Only some days later did the arrest, imprisonment, and punishment of the principal culprits begin. This was followed by the abolition of their customary law, the execution of nine prisoners, a plea of the leading Ghenters for mercy, which Charles met with warnings against the Ghenters' rebellious habits. He followed this with a decision to build a citadel within the city, followed on April 29 by the formal abolition of the city's traditional privileges and self-government.]

When the Emperor pronounced this sentence against Ghent and issued his ordinance concerning the city, the Ghenters were immensely shocked and afraid. They had good reason to be, but it gave them no comfort that they themselves were the cause of what was happening. The sentence and ordinance were not to their advantage at all but rather greatly to their detriment. Where previously it had been the greatest city in the whole county, they now became the least. Thanks to their crimes and abuses they lost what they had loved so much and guarded so well over so many long years, their privileges, and with them all their ancient customs and usages. They were deprived of these and also of all the other powers, franchises, and liberties which they had held in such number before. The Ghenters had possessed and used these with great

presumption, believing that no other city was comparable to this city of Ghent and themselves. They thought that there was no prince upon the earth great and mighty enough to dominate them and that even the Count of Flanders could do little or nothing without them. Great as they had been in their own estimation, so great now was their wrath against this sentence and ordinance made and pronounced by the Emperor to their great detriment, scandal, and reputation for all time; but none of them dared say one word of what they would have said, and what some would have done, if they dared. But the fine cavalry and infantry and the large numbers of troopers from every state, region, and country who were distributed and quartered in every part of the city prevented them from doing anything. The Ghenters were not even able to assemble to offer any riot or resistance; all their weapons and the artillery which belonged to the city or the guilds were taken from them, as were the guildhalls in which they were accustomed to meet and make disturbances, and where they kept their artillery and other weapons which belonged to them and had been kept from past wars and riots against their counts. Thus they were able to offer no resistance but could only mumble silently among themselves, but without seeming to, for they all feared for their lives; but most were very angry inside. Nevertheless they had to display patience, even if only under constraint, for there was nothing else they could do. Willingly or not, the Ghenters soon met the terms of the sentence. They handed over all their privileges, although with extreme regret, for they loved and esteemed these privileges more than anything else, which they had always thought made them the sovereigns and the superiors over everyone else.