# Power Elites and Royal Government in the Spanish Netherlands during the Last Phase of the Eighty Years' War (1621-1648)

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*Zoals vele grootmachten in het vroegmoderne Europa, was ook de Spaanse monarchie een samengestelde staat, een composite state, bestaande uit een core state – Castilië – en verschillende daarvan afhangende gebieden, perifere dependent states. De vorst resideerde in het hartland van de monarchie, en liet het bestuur van de perifere gewesten over aan gevolmachtigde vertegenwoordigers, onderkoningen of landvoogden.*

*Het feit dat de vorst afwezig bleef in het overgrote deel van zijn imperium en moest regeren vanop afstand, vormde een aanzienlijk probleem in een tijd en in een staatsordening waar de figuur van de vorst allesoverheersend was en verondersteld werd alomtegenwoordig te zijn om te besturen, recht te spreken en in te staan voor de landsverdediging. De wijze waarop zijn plaatsvervangers zich in de diverse gebiedsdelen van hun taak kweten, was dan ook van groot belang. In het bijzonder in die delen van het imperium waar het risico op interne politieke spanningen en contestatie van het gezag van de monarch niet denkbeeldig was, of in die gebieden die door buitenlandse vijanden werden belaagd, waren de keuze van zijn plaatsvervangers en de manier waarop door hen de vorstelijke macht ter plekke werd uitgeoefend, cruciaal. In de Zuidelijke Nederlanden van het tweede kwart van de zeventiende eeuw deden beide fenomenen zich voor: het was een gebied waar er, gezien de macht en de traditionele aanspraken van de politieke elites, een permanent potentieel gevaar bestond van politieke instabiliteit, en het was de regio waar de Tachtigjarige Oorlog (1568-1648) en de oorlog tegen Frankrijk (1635-1659) goeddeels werden uitgevochten.*

*De Zuidelijke Nederlanden zijn hierdoor een erg interessante casus aan de hand van dewelke de bestuurlijke modus operandi in de Spaanse samengestelde staat kan worden onderzocht. Een analyse van de machtsuitoefening in deze perifere maar strategisch erg belangrijke bezitting van de Spaanse vorsten, kan ons inderdaad veel leren over de politieke ambities en strategieën van de Spaanse centrale regering, over de middelen die zij ter beschikking had en over de beperkingen waarmee zij werd geconfronteerd.*

*Ik ga in deze tekst eerst na wat de voornaamste doelstellingen van Madrid in de Nederlanden waren, en hoe de gouverneurs-generaal geacht werden daarvoor te ijveren. Een tweede punt dat ik onder de aandacht breng, is wie de gouverneurs-generaal waren die tussen 1621 en 1648 door Filips IV belast werden met het bestuur van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden; aan de hand van dit overzicht zal ik ook proberen een antwoord te bieden op de vraag of de keuze voor de ene of de andere persoon al dan niet gebeurde in functie van de politieke en militaire conjunctuur. Een derde vraag die ik in dit kort artikel aankaart, is hoe de gouverneurs-generaal stonden tegenover de bevelen die ze vanuit Madrid kregen, en of ze de Madrileense inzichten en doelstellingen al dan niet deelden. Tenslotte verklaar ik waarom de elites in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, ondanks alle tegenslagen en voortdurend gebiedsverlies aan de Republiek en aan Frankrijk, aan de kant van Spanje bleven. Dat het gezag van Filips IV in de Spaanse Nederlanden niet of nauwelijks werd gecontesteerd, is m.i. onder meer een gevolg van de staatsgestuurde contrareformatie die de eerste decennia van de 17e eeuw de Zuidelijke Nederlanden doordrong van de idee van gehoorzaamheid, niet alleen aan kerkelijke overheid, maar ook aan de wereldlijke gezagsdragers.*

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In this chapter I wish to discuss some aspects of the way in which the king of Spain in the first half of the 17th century governed his huge empire. I shall do this by focussing on one of the most important territories within this empire: that is the Spanish Netherlands. In accordance with the general theme of this volume, I will pay special attention to a particular element in the relation between Philip IV and his subjects in this region, namely religion – that is Catholicism – as a factor in state formation.

## Part of a composite state

Let me begin with a quotation: "Most states in the early modern period were composite states, including more than one country under the sovereignty of one ruler" [1]. This well-known statement by professor Koenigsberger is perfectly applicable to the empire of the Spanish Habsburgs. The Spanish Monarchy was a mosaic of lands and peoples, all with their own laws, customs and institutions, but sharing a same ruler, who gathered these provinces together in a personal union. After their entry in the Monarchy, the constituent kingdoms continued to be treated as distinct entities, preserving their laws and privileges. In the words of the 17th-century Spanish jurist Solórzano Pereira, "all these kingdoms had to be governed and ruled as if the king who holds them all together were king only of each one of them" [2].

During his entire life, the indefatigable traveller Charles V tried to visit his lands personally, hoping in that way to reduce an unavoidable consequence of the extension of his empire, namely the increasing distance between the ruler and his subjects. He tried to give a personal and highly visible touch to his government in order to keep alive the illusion of royal nearness. From the 1560s on however, with Philip II's designation of Madrid as the central capital for all his possessions, the empire was to be governed from one centre, the kingdom of Castile. Unlike his father, the new monarch had no intention of travelling all the time, and he decided to transform the legacy of the emperor into an hierarchically structured empire, consisting of, at its centre, Castile – in the terminology of Rao and Supphellen the *ruling country* – and several dependent territories [3]. From that moment on, the king resided almost permanently in the ruling country, governing his monarchy with the help of a series of bureaucratic institutions created throughout the 16th century and based in Madrid [4].

In order to make the composite monarchy work and operate, one of the most vital institutions was that of the royal representative, called *viceroy* or *governor general*. In each dependent territory, the king appointed a supreme delegate who had to govern this land as the king would do if he were present.

The origins of this institutional answer to the problem of royal absenteeism lay in the Crown of Aragon, a regional power that in the late Middle Ages had developed into a Mediterranean composite state. From the end of the 15th century onwards however, *regencies* were also known in the Burgundian Low Countries. During the 16th century, the system was generalized throughout the entire Spanish Monarchy, in order to cope with the administrative necessities generated by spectacular territorial growth in Europe and the colonies. And so, at the end of the 16th century, the Monarchy counted no fewer than 13 peripheral or dependent possessions governed by viceroys or governors general.

The fact that most of the time – and in many cases, all the time – the king was absent and had to rule from a distance caused serious problems, especially since the king's presence was regarded as indispensable not only for the government, but also for the administration of justice and for the conferral of rewards and honours. Subjects considered it as quite normal and necessary that the sovereign, the person in whom so many lines of power and authority merged, should be present among them. Royal absence created, therefore, a vacuum that was difficult to fill, and hence the way in which the viceroys in the different kingdoms carried out their duties was of great importance. Especially in those parts of the empire where the risk of internal political tensions or contestation of royal authority were not unthinkable, or in the regions that were threatened by the enemy, the choice of the royal representative and the way in which he exercised royal powers were crucial matters.

In the second quarter of the 17th century, both phenomena were present in the Southern Low Countries: there was indeed a permanent risk of internal political instability, due to the traditional pretensions of the local elites. Moreover this territory was Spain's *plaza de armas*, the battlefield where the Eighty Year's War was fought, and the bastion from which offensives against France – Spain's chief rival for hegemony in Europe – could be launched.

For all these reasons, Flanders constitutes a very interesting case that allows a close investigation of the governmental *modus operandi* in the Spanish composite state. Indeed the analysis of some aspects of the exercise of power in this peripheral but politically and strategically very important possession of Spain can shed light on the crown's aims and ambitions, on the means that were at its disposal, and on the difficulties and limits it was confronted with.

## Aims and ambitions

Let us concentrate first – but in very general terms – on Spain's principal political and military objectives in the Low Countries, and on what Madrid expected that the governors general in Brussels would do in order to achieve these goals.

Already during the Twelve Year's Truce it was evident that the Madrid government would not be disposed to prolong this truce, and certainly not from 1618 onwards, when in the Holy Roman Empire the difficulties between Catholics and Protestants re-emerged. On the other hand, in the Republic too the supporters of war were gaining the advantage, and thus it became very clear in 1621 that the war between Spain and the Republic would resume.

Officially, the objective of Madrid was the total submission of "the Dutch rebels"; in reality however the Spanish government knew that this would be quite impossible, but it

hoped that by starting an offensive war against the Republic, the States General in the North would be compelled to concentrate all available financial means in the homeland and would withdraw from the colonial world. For regaining total control over the colonies and bringing Dutch overseas expansion to a halt were, for Spain, the prime issues at stake. Furthermore, Madrid hoped to force the Republic to accept other conditions of peace than those of 1609, so that the long Spanish-Dutch war could be brought to an end under terms that were honourable for Spain [5].

And so, in 1621, the Spanish representatives in Brussels had to prepare the reconversion of Flanders – after twelve years of peace – into a zone that was ready for war. Flanders once again had to become what J. Israel has called "the hammer and the anvil" of the empire [6]. This was not only a military and economic matter, but also a political one, since the local elites had to be convinced of the necessity of the war, so that they would be prepared to pay for it. The taxes paid by the Low Countries – and due to the political system, these taxes could not be paid without the consent of the parliaments – would be of increasing importance, as we shall see later. Hence the internal political circumstances that would allow for the resumption of war had to be created. The situation of war required internal order and stability, and thus the governor general had to do everything that was necessary to win and to maintain the confidence of the population. Any manifestation of discontent would have to be handled with the necessary skill and determination.

These difficult assignments for the governors general became even more complicated when in 1635 the Franco-Spanish war broke out. It increased the pressure on the army as well as on the population. From 1635 on Spain had to fight on two fronts, and under conditions that were far from favourable, because, from 1640 onwards, Philip IV and Olivares had also to deal with the revolts of the Portuguese and the Catalans. This meant fewer funds for the war in Flanders, and consequently the governors general had to do more with less.

## Governors of royal blood

Given the issues at stake, it is obvious that the mission of the governors general in Brussels was momentous and far from easy. The importance of the post was also reflected in the status of the individuals who held the office: in the second quarter of the 17th century, the job was only given to members of the dynastic family or to noble diplomats who enjoyed the full confidence of Philip IV and Olivares.

In 1621, after the death of her husband Archduke Albert, the infante Isabella was appointed governor general for life. In the agreement of 1598, by which Philip II donated the Netherlands to his daughter Isabella and her husband Albert and by which the Low Countries became a sovereign state under the archdukes, it was stipulated that the Low Countries would remain an independent country if the marriage were blessed with the birth of an heir. If not, the territory would revert to Spain after the death of one of the archdukes. Since the marriage remained childless and Albert died in 1621, the Spanish Netherland *ipso facto* returned to the crown in 1621, but, because this was also part of the 1598 agreement, Isabella stayed in power as governor general. This meant indeed a degradation of Isabella's position – from sovereign to a high-ranking public servant – but Isabella

was prepared to accept these consequences of the 1598 agreement, not only for reasons of dynastic solidarity (she knew that it would make the transition easier if she stayed in the Low Countries as governor general), but also because she wanted to stay and to die in the country she had ruled for more than 20 years. For Madrid this was an excellent solution, because the popular and respected infante would embody a certain continuity, and this would make the transition to Spain and the resumption of war more acceptable to the Flemish subjects. In addition, by appointing the infante, the king of Spain observed an old tradition that said that only members of the royal family could hold the post of governor general in Flanders.

And indeed, the choice for Isabella was a good one. Flemish elites did not oppose the war with the Republic, nor later the war with France. Even when, after 1625, the Army of Flanders accumulated defeats and the Republic succeeded in capturing vast territories in Zeeland, Brabant and Limbourg, the internal political situation in the South remained relatively calm; there was only one minor attempt at a conspiracy by a handful of noblemen, but they were not followed by the great majority of the traditional elites. So for Spain, the popular and respected Isabella was an efficient political instrument.

Isabella remained in office until she died in 1633. She was succeeded by an interim governor, the marquis of Aytona. He was a protégé – an *hechura* – of the all-powerful count-duke of Olivares and had been the Spanish ambassador in Vienna. He was fully informed about the situation in the Holy Roman Empire and of course knew personally the emperor and his principal ministers. Aytona remained in charge until the autumn of 1634, when the Cardinal-Infante don Fernando de Austria, king Philip IV's younger brother, arrived in Brussels to take up the function of governor general. Through the appointment of this young and vigorous prince of the blood, Madrid wanted to give a clear signal to the population in the tormented Flanders as well as to the enemy. What greater sign of respect and sympathy could the king give to his Flemish subjects than the nomination of his own brother? At the same time, by appointing this eminent and charismatic member of the dynasty, Madrid wanted to boost the bellicose spirit in the army and the population, and show that the king was prepared to do anything to win the war, as he indeed did by sending his only brother to the battlefield. During his mandate, the cardinal infante was systematically presented as a royal *Miles Christi*, a prince who fought to defend Roman Catholicism against the heretics.

Don Fernando died in 1641, at the age of 32, and he was succeeded by the Portuguese nobleman don Francisco de Melo, who like Aytona had formerly been Spanish ambassador at the imperial court and was a protégé (an *hechura*, as they called themselves) of Olivares. Indeed, Melo was even more a protégé of Olivares, to whom he owed his spectacular social ascension, than Aytona had been. In the 1630s for instance, Melo was a simple knight (an *hidalgo*), but in less then five years – thanks to the support of Olivares – he became a marquis. But after his crushing defeat at the hands of the French at Rocroi in 1643, he could no longer be maintained as governor of the Low Countries. Since Olivares himself in the meantime had disappeared from the political scene, he could no longer protect his protégés. Melo was sacked and replaced by another governor *ad interim*, the marquis of Castel Rodrigo, a senior diplomat and at the time of his nomination, Spanish ambassador in Vienna, as Aytona and Melo had been before him. He held the office until 1647, when

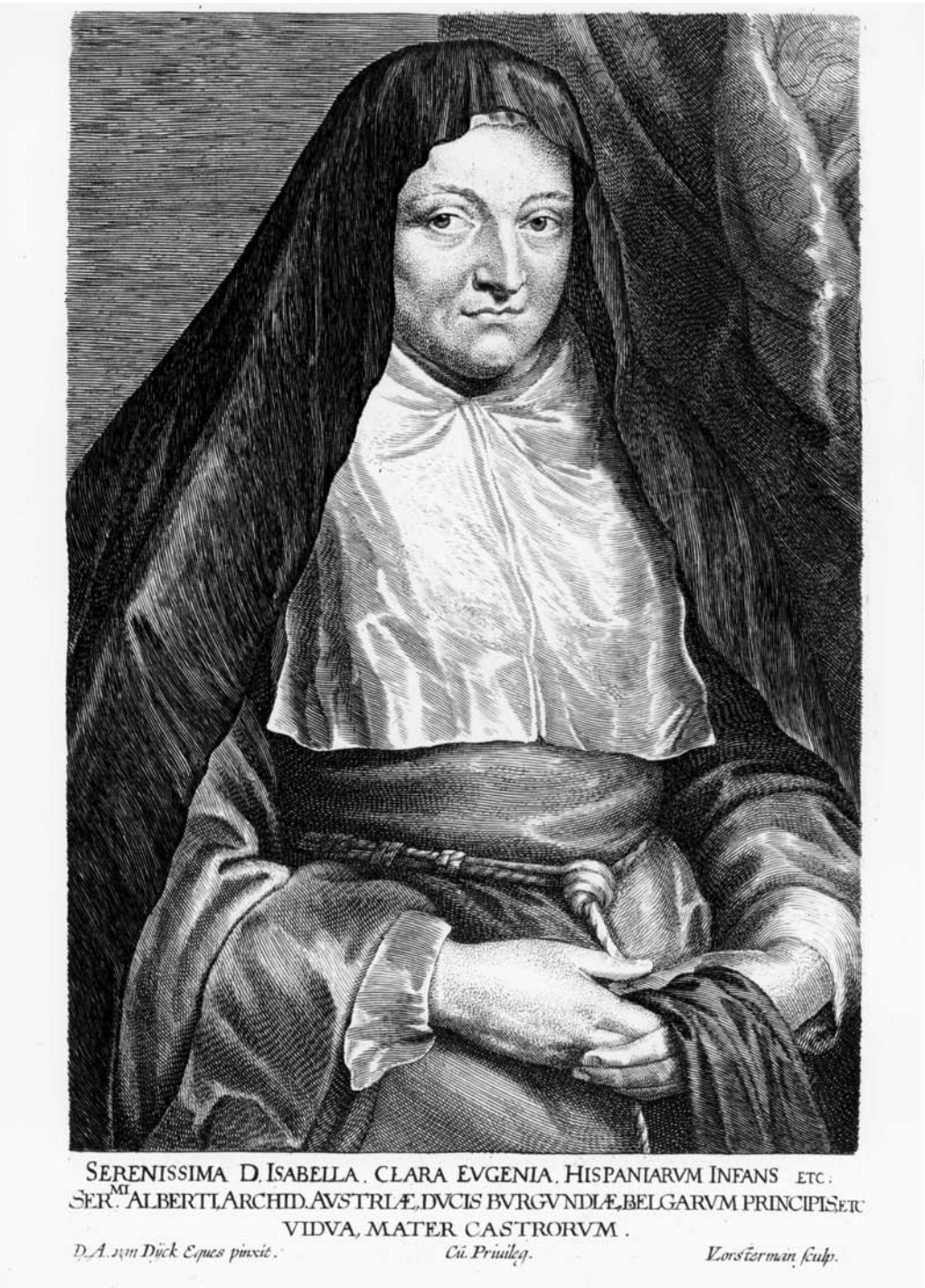


**Fig. 1**
Archduchess Isabella, after the death of her husband, as a member of the Third Order of St. Francis. Engraving by L. Vorsterman after A. van Dyck, University Library, Ghent.

Emperor Ferdinand III's brother, Leopold-William, accepted nomination as the new governor general of the Spanish Netherlands.

When we take a closer look at this list of five governors general, we see three major characteristics. First, the preference for a prince of the blood, a member of the dynasty. This was an important element in the relation between the absent king and his Flemish subjects. The elites in Flanders still considered their region, where the dukes of Burgundy had reigned and Charles V was born, as the homeland of the dynasty, and therefore as one of the most prominent parts of the Monarchy. And that was the reason why they expected preferential treatment. They saw the appointment of a prince or a princess as necessary proof of the king's love, as royal commitment to the well being of Flanders. They would not be satisfied with anyone less than a member of the dynasty as their official governor general.

Madrid, on the other hand, very cleverly made use of this Flemish loyalty to the Burgundian-Habsburg dynasty: it was one of its major political arms. The nomination of the cardinal infante for instance was perhaps one of the most clear manifestations of the use of dynastic loyalty as a political tool. In the first months after his arrival in the Low Countries, several triumphal entries were organised in his honour. In the iconographical language that was used during these entries – conceived of course by the central government, and therein efficiently assisted by the Jesuits – the cardinal infante was systematically presented in the company of his glorious ancestors, clearly in order to express the idea that the cardinal infante represented dynastic continuity, so that he would be considered to be the embodiment of the dynasty and would thus be honoured and obeyed.

The triumphal entry of don Fernando in Ghent was really remarkable, because more then during the entry in Brussels or Antwerp, a very clear link was made between the cardinal infante on the one hand, and Charles V on the other. Remarkable indeed, since we all know the difficult relation between Ghent and the city's most illustrious son. But one century after the Ghent rebellion of 1540, all the unpleasant memories seemed to have faded. The city had reconciled itself with Charles and now joyfully received his great-grandson, the cardinal infante (Fig. 2).

A second feature that draws our attention is that before they were appointed governor general ad interim, Aytona, Melo and Castel Rodrigo had held the post of Spanish ambassador in Vienna, and Leopold-William of course was the brother of the emperor. It is very clear that Madrid wanted the royal representative in Brussels to know the situation in the Empire thoroughly and to have had personal experience of court politics in Vienna. We might well ask ourselves why that was. Discussing this point in detail would lead us of course much too far, but it is very clear that Madrid realized that without the political and military help of the emperor it would not be able to end the conflict with the Republic in an honourable way. Generally it is believed that the emperor needed Spain's help. That was certainly true, especially in the 1620s. But from 1629 on, after the loss of the city of Bois-le-Duc, and because of the increasing tensions with France, Madrid hoped that Vienna would assist Spain actively in the Low Countries. In the *consultas*, the reports of the Spanish Council of State, one can see time and again how the king and his first minister hoped that salvation would come from the east, and they counted on Aytona, Melo, Castel


**Fig. 2**
Charles V urges the cardinal infante to follow his example. Engraving by P. de Jode after G. de Crayer, University Library, Ghent.

Rodrigo and Leopold-William to make this happen. We now know, however, the emperor was not very eager to reach out a helping hand.

A third and last element which should be stressed when commenting on the social and political rank of the governors general, is the allegiance of some of them to Olivares. Aytona and Melo belonged to the network of the count-duke, and so did a number of the most important ministers in Brussels, such as the chief-president of the Secret Council, Pierre Roose, or the Secretary of State and War don Miguel de Salamanca. During the second quarter of the 17th century what some scholars have called "the Spanish Ministry in Brussels" was indeed dominated by clients of Olivares [7]. Their influence in policymaking can hardly be exaggerated. It went so far that Olivares had, for instance, more confidence in and relied more on Pierre Roose then on the cardinal infante.

## The reality of Flanders

Now that we have sketched the Spanish objectives and ambitions related to the Southern Low Countries, and we have taken a closer look at the persons who held the office of gov-

ernor general in the period 1621-1648, I turn to address the following question, namely whether the governors general did or did not share the viewpoints of the king and his first minister. I will do this by examining what was perhaps the hottest topic in this period, to wit the question of war or peace with the United Provinces.

In the summer of 1621, hostilities between Spain and the Republic resumed, after twelve years of truce. Isabella, like Albert before his death, was strongly opposed to the resumption of this war. She advocated a renewal of the truce or the signing of a general peace, because she feared that it would be very difficult for Spain – as the situation before 1609 had demonstrated – to collect the necessary funds for what was expected to be a long and exhausting war. She feared that, if the money were not available, the Spanish army in the Southern Netherlands would suffer an endless series of severe setbacks, which undoubtedly would have devastating consequences, such as a massive loss of territory, and heavy and continuous pressure on the inhabitants of the obedient provinces.

Spain's good fortune on the battle field lasted until 1625. That year Spinola captured Breda. It was an unequalled victory, but also the beginning of the end. Two years later, the first bankruptcy of the reign of Philip IV was a fact. Sustaining the war, not only in the Low Countries but also in Italy, became more and more difficult indeed. In 1629, the prince of Orange captured Bois-le-Duc, and in 1632 Spain lost Maastricht to the Dutch. The worst case scenario of the Archduchess had become reality.

During the months after the capture of Breda, in 1625-1626, the Dutch seemed willing to talk about peace, and Isabella and Spinola insisted upon truce talks, but the triumphant count-duke Olivares made such high demands that he left the Dutch no other choice than to continue the struggle. After their capture of Bois-le-Duc, the Dutch were of course no longer interested in a truce or a peace, and in 1632, with Maastricht firmly in their possession, even less so.

Under these circumstances, the Estates, the parliaments of the obedient provinces, insisted upon opening truce talks at the level of the Estates General, in other words, truce talks between the Estates General in the South and the Estates General in the North, without interference from Madrid. The Southern Estates believed that the obstinate attitude of the king of Spain and his prime minister Olivares was the major obstacle to reaching an agreement with the North.

With her back against the wall, but also because she personally favoured peace, Isabella permitted the Southern Estates General to start negotiations with the Dutch. She knew that she was acting against the orders of her royal nephew Philip IV, but the archduchess was prepared to take the risk. In her view, it was time for Philip and Olivares to cut their losses and accept a peace by which both parties would definitively keep what they had already acquired. This implied the official recognition of the North as a sovereign state and the acceptance of the loss of an important part of the Southern Netherlands to the Republic. But fortunately for the king and his prime minister – they were of course strongly opposed to negotiating from a position of weakness, and they blamed Isabella for her conduct – the Dutch, eager to strike a decisive blow, accorded the negotiations between the Estates General no chance. In 1634 the truce talks were broken off, without any result. The war went on.

Meanwhile Isabella had died. Her interim successor, the marquis of Aytona, who had been assisting her since 1629, initially supported the strong views of Philip and Olivares. He too was convinced that the war could be won, but after the fall of Maastricht, with the French threats against the Southern Netherlands, and the repeated Protestant victories in the Holy Roman Empire, he changed his mind, and became an advocate for peace, but without disobeying the king. Despite his own divergent opinions he always carried out what Madrid ordered him to do.

The cardinal-infante went through the same evolution. From 1635 onwards he had to fight on two fronts – against the Dutch and against the French – but he believed in victory, until 1637, when Breda again fell into the hands of the prince of Orange, and the combined Franco-Dutch forces proved to be too strong. From that moment on, he cautiously, and with the support of the highest clergy of the South, insisted on re-establishing peace negotiations with the Dutch. He proceeded cautiously, because on the one occasion, in 1636, when he had taken an initiative in this direction, Philip and Olivares had not spared their harsh criticisms. And of course, as don Fernando wrote again and again in his letters, he would rather die than to act against the will of his royal brother. So the cardinal-infante fought on, even though he knew that the only way to save the South from a total catastrophe would be an immediate ending of the war and compliance with the conditions proposed by the Dutch.

Exhausted and ill, don Fernando died in 1641. His successor, the Portuguese eager-beaver don Francisco de Melo, began his term of office with a great of zeal and enthusiasm. He assured his patron Olivares that he would do a better job than his predecessors, and in the beginning, he did. But after two or three victories, came the smashing defeat at Rocroi in 1643. This was sufficient to bring Melo back to earth and to turn him into an advocate for peace for the rest of his term as governor general. In 1644 he was replaced by a clear-headed realist, the marquis of Castel Rodrigo. In the meantime, Olivares had been removed from power, the Catalan and Portuguese rebellions had broken out, and even in Madrid the king and his ministers now saw that peace – with conditions that were highly unfavourable to Spain – was unavoidable. So Castel Rodrigo was the first governor general from whom Madrid did not expect to win the unwinnable war. Castel Rodrigo had to limit the damage and prepare the signing of the peace of Münster. In Münster, it was the Dutch ambassadors who dictated the conditions of peace. The king of Spain paid the price for what Paul Kennedy has called "strategical overstretch" [8].

Now, if we consider the points of view concerning war or peace with the Republic of Isabella, Aytona, the Cardinal Infante and Melo, we see that at a given moment, they were all clearly opposed to the directives of Madrid. But in the end they did what Madrid ordered them to do, and that was to fight on. An open conflict never arose between Madrid and Brussels. Why? Clearly for two reasons: family ties and dynastic loyalties on the one hand, and client-patron relations on the other. And perhaps there was also a third reason, and that was the absence of any meaningful opposition in Flanders to the decisions taken in Madrid.

## A SHOCKPROOF COHABITATION

It has to be pointed out that the traditional elites of the Spanish Low Countries, through their representatives in the Estates of Flanders, Brabant and so on, had from the beginning

supported Spain's war effort. Clearly they preferred peace, but not just any peace, and so, even when things began to go wrong, they voluntarily kept paying their part of the financial burden, and moreover, in an increasing way [9].

Unlike Catalonia, Portugal or Naples, the Spanish Netherlands were characterized by a considerable degree of political stability. In an important article, J. Elliott spoke about Castile as a *non-revolutionary society* [10]. The same applies to the Spanish Netherlands. This stability was the consequence of shared values; it was the outcome of a form of consensus between the central government in Madrid and the power elites in Flanders. In order to understand the existence of this consensus, we have to bear in mind three crucial factors: first, the Catholic religion (in opposition to Protestantism), second, the respect by the king of the regional and local autonomies in Flanders – it even would not be an exaggeration to speak in this context of a *balance of powers* – and third, Flemish loyalty to the Burgundian-Habsburg dynasty.

Farnese's *Reconquista* at the end of the 16th century was followed by a massive and systematic re-Catholicisation of the southern part of the Low Countries, with the result that within just a few decades, the region became impregnated by the Tridentine spirit and, hence, became a bulwark of the Counter-Reformation [11]. Very quickly the Catholic reform offensive of Rome had its effect on all segments of the population. The Catholic assertiveness which resulted thereby provoked very clear opposition to the heretics of the North. This was, without any doubt, one of the forces propelling these provinces to engage in a lasting war. The visible presence of bishops, deans and priests among their flock not only was a very efficient way to strengthen the control of the church hierarchy over its parishioners, but it made equally possible the filtering through of a message of a political-ideological nature. Continuously, fear of and repugnance for the Calvinists was drilled into the heads of the citizens of the Southern Low Countries, and simultaneously the proclamation of the faith was imbued with the idea of the need for obedience to the secular and ecclesiastical authorities [12]. This cultivation by the prelates of awe for the authorities was very convenient for the monarch. The piety of the archdukes (rulers of the Southern Low Countries from 1598 to 1621) and their large-scale financial aid for churches and monasteries were evidently not only meant for their spiritual welfare and that of their subjects; the process of re-Catholicisation they fostered was equally an offensive to give new strength to the central political power. The perseverance – which even for the Spanish in charge was surprising – with which the loyal provinces from 1621 on continued to back the war against the North proves that three decades of Counter-Reformation were deeply inculcated in the minds and hearts in this part of the king of Spain's possessions.

Catholicism was thus a truly important factor that sustained the acceptance of royal authority. Together with the respect shown by Madrid for the local and regional liberties, and the emphasis laid upon the dynastic tradition, displayed during the glorious entries of governors general of royal blood for example, it was one of the pillars royal authority rested upon. The Madrid government knew very well the attachment of the Flemish to their religion, to their liberties as well as to their dynasty, a Burgundian-Habsburg dynasty that we could almost say had been created in the Low Countries and to whom they owed a great deal of allegiance. Madrid did not hesitate to make political use of this attachment, even if this entailed a loss of power for the central government, as was the case with its obligation to respect Flemish liberties.

These three elements together explain why even at very critical moments, such as in 1629 and 1632, the Spanish Netherlands explicitly chose for Spain. Given the pitiful situation of the Army of Flanders, other options would have been possible, such as welcoming the French or the Dutch with open arms, or seeking independence. But neither the Calvinist Republic nor the aggressive and authoritarian France of Richelieu could charm the inhabitants of Flanders. Despite subsequent losses and defeats, the Spanish Army remained the only barrier against the enemies, and therefore the only guarantee for the survival of the political system in the Spanish Low Countries, a system of checks and balances, with really a great deal of autonomy for the local and regional power elites. Spain's army was also the only guarantee for the preservation of Roman Catholicism as the sole religion in Flanders. In short, separation and independence from Spain simply was not wanted, because an independent and neutral Flanders would be highly vulnerable; independence did not offer the protection for the values cherished in Flanders as did the Army of Philip IV, however weak it may have been.

For all these reasons, the Flemish power elites chose consciously for the protecting hand of Spain. They would never have incited the governors general in Brussels to turn away from Madrid. As enemy pressure increased, Flemish willingness to co-finance the war also increased. Continuing the war until some kind of agreement was reached seemed for all parties concerned in the Spanish Netherlands the best thing do.

## Notes

[1] About the notions of 'plural monarchy', 'composite monarchy' or 'composite state', see H. G. Koenigsburger, *Dominium Regale or Dominium Politicum et Regale. Monarchies and Parliaments in Early Modern Europe* in idem, *Politicians and Virtuosi. Essays in Early Modern History*. London – Ronceverte 1986, p. 12, as well as J. H. Elliott, *A Europe of composite states* in "Past and Present", 137, 1992, p. 59.

[2] Elliott, *A Europe* cit., pp. 52-53; C. Russell, *Gran Bretaña a comienzos del siglo XVII: monarquía compuesta y reino múltiple* in C. Russell, J. Andrés-Gallego, *Las Monarquías del Antiguo Régimen, ¿monarquías compuestas?*, Madrid 1996, p. 32.

[3] A. M. Rao and S. Supphellen define the politically "dependent territory" as a territory concerning which "basic decisions are taken elsewhere", more precisely in the "ruling country" of the *composite state*. Cf. A. M. Rao, S. Supphellen, *Power Elites and Dependent Territories* in W. Reinhard (ed.), *Power Elites and State Building*. Oxford - New York, pp. 79-80.

[4] See R Vermeir, *La construction de l'Empire. L'origine des transformations institutionnelles en Espagne au XVIe siècle*, in M. Boone, M. Demoor, *Charles V in Context: the Making of a European Identity*. Ghent - Brussels 2003, pp. 47-60.

[5] R. Vermeir, *'Oorloghsvloeck en Vredens Zegen.' Madrid, Brussel en de Zuid-Nederlandse Staten over oorlog en vrede met de Republiek, 1621-1648* in "Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden", 115, 2000, pp. 1-32.

[6] J. I. Israel, *Olivares, the Cardinal-Infante and Spain's strategy in the Low Countries (1635-1643): the road to Rocroi* in R. L. Kagan, G. Parker, *Spain, Europe and the Atlantic world. Essays in honour of John H. Elliott*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 269-270.

[7] On the "Spanish ministry" in Brussels, see J. Lefevre, *Le Ministère Espagnol de l'Archiduc Albert, 1598-1621* in "Bulletin de l'Académie Royale d'Archéologie de Belgique", 1924, pp. 202-204.

[8] P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York 1987, p. 48.

[9] R. Vermeir, *In staat van oorlog. Filips IV en de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1629-1648*, Maastricht 2001, pp. 328-332.

[10] See J. Elliott, *A Non-Revolutionary Society: Castile in the 1640's* in *Études d'histoire européenne. Mélanges offerts à René et Suzanne Pillorget*, Angers 1990, pp. 253-269.

[11] E. de Moreau, SJ, even speaks about "the most brilliant time of the Catholic church in Belgium before 1830": E. de Moreau, *Histoire de l'Église en Belgique*, V, Brussels 1952, p. 438. See also A. Pasteur, *La restauration religieuse aux Pays-Bas Catholiques sous les Archiducs Albert et Isabelle (1598-1633)*, Leuven 1925.

[12] A. K. L. Thijs, *Van geuzenstad tot katholiek bolwerk. Antwerpen en de contrareformatie*, Turnhout 1990, pp. 62-63.

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## SOURCE

Letter from Brussels, by the Marquis of Aytona to the count-duke Olivares, 13 November 1629.

[After the loss of the important city of Bois-le-Duc (Brabant) to the Dutch Republic in September 1629, Madrid sent the Spanish ambassador in Vienna, the Marquis of Aytona, to Brussels, to help and assist the Archduchess Isabel, who was at that time governor-general of the Spanish Netherlands. The victories of the Dutch army in the Low Countries had put the Spanish Netherlands and the Spanish authority in the country, in a deep crisis, and king Philip IV and his first minister, Olivares, hoped that Aytona would be able to manage at least the political aspects of this crisis in Flanders.]

*Anteayer llegué a este lugar, y aunque la brevedad con que Su Alteza despachó este correo me pudiera escusar de escrivir a Su Magestad sobre las materias de acá, no he querido perder una hora de tiempo en dar quenta a Vuestra Excelencia de lo que entiendo. Señor, yo estava muy contento viéndome libre de la flema y reposo de los alemanes y del descu?do con que tratan sus cossas, pero hallo aquí lo mismo, porque ha tres días que el marqués de Mirabel y yo llegamos aquí, y Su Alteza entiendo que tratará otros dos en darnos audiencia, porque dizen que en la pieza donde suele darla se estan mudando unos maderos, con que yo no sé hasta aora lo que he de hazer ni en que he de servir a Su Magestad, pudiendo Su Alteza havernos dado audiencia en qualquier otra parte, porque no solo los días, pero las horas son precissas en esta ocassión. Yo hallo, señor, por lo que he o?do a los amigos que tenía en este pa?s y de quien juzgo que me dizen verdad, que este pays ama al rey nuestro señor, aborreze el govierno de las juntas del cardenal con los demás, blasfeman del conde Henrique sin haver hombre que le defienda, hay disposición en estas provincias (si con agassajo, amor y confianza los tratamos) para dar la sangre por defender lo que queda, y mucho más si Su Magestad pone en reputación aquí sus armas con sus hordinarias asistencias, y lo político y militar se govierna en mejor forma que hasta aquí. Estas materias corrientes piden prontas y violentas rresoluciones, porque sin ellas temo que el enemigo ha de haver este mes de henero cossas que nadie las piensa, porque la ocassión le convida de ver que no tiene Su Magestad aquí gente ni cavos de guerra, y confussión en el tratar y ressolver las materias. Si el marqués de Mirabel y yo hemos de continuar las juntas con el cardenal, Vuestra Excelencia dé por perdido esto, porque entrarán en mayor desesperación los que con nuestra venida esperavan el remedio, siendo cierto que gran parte de los travajos pressentes consiste en el odio que aquí tienen al cardenal, y yo soy de parecer, y lo he comunicado con el marqués de Mirabel y con don Carlos Coloma [a Spanish officer and diplomat in Brussels], que es menester mirar mucho como nos juntamos los demás y que sería bien que concurriessen en la junta con nosotros algunos del pa?s para sacarlos de la desconfianza con que están los naturales, y si de algunas materias no quissiesse Su Alteza darles partes, podría tratarlas aparte con quien fuesse servida. Y en todo casso es necessario, señor, granjear y confiar a los del pa?s tratándolos como a buenos hermanos, porque está en su mano el apartarse de Su Magestad y tenerse con los rebeldes y hacer cantones y una república como la de los Esguizaros, quedándoles libre el ejercicio de la religión cattólica, y esto hay quien les persuade en los payses de la Marca y Juliers, y se deve temer mucho que lo executen si Su Magestad no lo ataja con los medios que he dicho y otros que se ofrezerán. Y la tregua la tengo por impossible si Su Magestad no se dispone para la guerra gallardamente, que es solo el medio con que se les [the enemy, i.e. the Republic] ha de obligar a que la hagan. Passado mañana se juntan en Holanda para tratar si*

*sera bien oyrnos, y en esta desestimación con que nos tratan hechará de ver Vuestra Excelencia lo que se puede esperar. Anteayer tentaron ganar el fuerte de Santa Cruz, con que se hecha de ver que este imbierno no sosegarán. Hasta aora yo no sé a quien acudir quando tengo algun aviso de importancia para que disponga y prevenga las cossas de la guerra desde acá. Vuestra Excelencia perdone que no le doy mas larga quenta, que es materia de solos tres dias la que escribo.*

The day before yesterday I arrived in this place and although the swiftness with which Her Highness [the Archduchess] sent this mail off could excuse me from writing to His Majesty [the king of Spain] about what is happening here, I did not want let an hour pass without giving an account to Your Excellency [the count-duke of Olivares] of what I hear. My lord, I was very happy to see myself free of the phlegm and slowness of the Germans and the negligence with which they treat their affairs, but I find the same thing here, because it is three days since the Marquis of Mirabel [a Spanish diplomat, like Aytona newly arrived in the Spanish Netherlands] and I arrived here, and her Highness I understand will take another two days before she gives us audience, because they say they are changing some woodwork in the room where she usually gives audience, so that I do not know yet what I must do nor how I can serve His Majesty, since Her Highness could have given us audience in any other place, because not only the days but the very hours are precious in this situation. I find, my lord, on the basis of what I have heard from the friends that I had in this country and those that I judge tell me the truth, that this country loves the King our lord [Philip IV], abhors the junta government of the Cardinal [the Spanish ambassador in Brussels, cardinal Alonso de la Cueva] with the rest, swear against count Henry [count Henry Van den Bergh, a local nobleman] without there being a single man that defends him. There is a willingness in these provinces (if we treat them with affection, love and trust) to give blood for defending what is left, and much more if His Majesty gives his army a reputation here with its regular support, and the political and the military affairs are governed in a better way than until now. These current affairs require fast and vigorous decisions, because without them I fear that the enemy will accomplish in this month of January things that no one imagines, because the situation shows that His Majesty here has neither soldiers nor means of war, and confusion in negotiating affairs and making decisions. If the Marques of Mirabel and I have to continue the juntas with the Cardinal, Your Excellency can give it up for lost, because those who hoped with our arrival to have a remedy will fall into greater desperation, being certain that the most of the problems here are related to their hatred for the Cardinal, and I am of the opinion, and I communicated it with the Marques of Mirabel and with don Carlos Coloma [a Spanish officer and diplomat in Brussels], that it is necessary look carefully at how we unite the others and that it would be well to have in the Junta with us some people of the country in order to bring them out of the diffidence in which the natives of the country have fallen, and if there are some matters about which Her Highness does not want them to be informed, they could be dealt with separately with those whom she considers appropriate. And in any case, my lord, it is necessary to cultivate and to place trust in those of this country, treating them like brothers, because it is in their hands to break away from His Majesty and to go over to the rebels and to form cantons and a republic like the Swiss one, leaving them free to practice the Catholic religion, and there are those who are persuading them in the country of LaMarck and Jülich, and we must fear greatly what they can accomplish if His Majesty does not contrast them with the means that I have mentioned and others which will become available. And as to a truce I consider it impossible unless His Majesty makes ready vigorously for war, which is the only means by which they [the enemy, i.e. the Republic] can be forced to accept it. The day after tomorrow they meet in Holland in order to treat whether to hear us, and with this lack of respect with which they treat us Your Excellency can [see] what can be expected. The day before yesterday they tried to take the fort of Santa Cruz, from which we see that this winter they will not desist. Until now I do not know to whom to have recourse when I have any important news in order that matters of war can be arranged and provided for from here. Your Excellency will pardon me for not giving a more ample account; what I have written is based on only three days.

From: Royal Library, Brussels. Man. 16147-48, f. 44-45.