

The 'Apology' or Defense of William of Orange against The ban or edict of the king of Spain,
1581

Introduction: In response to Philip II's proscription of William of Orange, the Prince issued his response and justification of his rebellion against Phillip II, known as the 'Apology.' It was presented to the States General on December 13, 1580. Originally written in French, it was published in February of 1851 in Dutch, English, and German and sent to all of Europe's leaders. The selections below were translated from the French by Herbert H. Rowen and published in his *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 81-91.

My Lords, from the time that I first dedicated myself and all my worldly goods to the recovery of your liberty and the defense of your persons, estates, and consciences, I have always prayed with all my heart that God should grant me this, that if I should ever prefer my own personal interests to your general welfare, I should suffer the eternal punishment and ignominy which I would have brought upon myself by my own doing. On the other hand, I asked God that if what I have done until now was undertaken only for the preservation of your state and if I have borne so much of the responsibility for the conduct of this present war, I have done so only for the common safety of the fatherland. If all the hatred felt by wicked men against this country and against all persons of merit and honor, which they had falsely hidden in their hearts, is now let loose upon me rather than upon all these worthy people or even upon the Republic in general, and if these have been my intentions toward you, my Lords, and toward your children, your cities, and your communities, then I prayed that I might some day publish solemn testimony that this was so, as much for my conscience's repose as in defense of my honor before all the nations of the earth and before all posterity.

That God permits me to receive this rare, noble, and excellent mark of honor that a cruel, barbarous proscription is put out against me, which is utterly without precedent and beyond belief in this country, famed among all peoples and nations for its characteristic loving-kindness, gives me great joy and reason to be greatly gladdened and satisfied, for which I render everlasting thanks to our good God. For, although a man can desire nothing more than that his life should run a happy, prosperous, and even course, without shocks or knocks, it is also true that if everything had gone as I wanted, and if I had not earned the hatred of the Spanish nation

and its adherents, I would not have been rewarded by this testimony paid to me by my enemies; it is the finest garland of glory that I could desire before I die. What gives more pleasure in this world, especially to one who has undertaken the great and excellent task of defending the freedom of a good people against the oppression of wicked men, than to be the target of the mortal hatred of his enemies, who are also the enemies of the fatherland, and to receive from their own mouths such a telling tribute to one's loyalty to his own people and to his constancy in the face of tyrants and disturbers of the public peace? The Spaniards and their adherents imagined that they would hurt me with this infamous ban, but they have only given me greater joy and satisfaction. Not only have I gained this fruit from their labors, but they have opened up for me a field wider than I could have hoped for where I can defend myself and tell the world that what I undertook was fair and just. Thus I could leave to my posterity an example of virtue to be followed by all of them who do not wish to dishonor the nobility of the ancestors from whom we are descended, of whom not one ever upheld tyranny but all loved the liberty of the peoples over whom they held office and legitimate power.

I do not have any reason to complain that before this I lacked adequate grounds for speaking of myself or for accusing my enemies of great and grievous faults. But modesty kept me from singing my own praises, although this is hard to avoid on such an occasion, however modest one tries to be, and common courtesy forbade that I dilate upon my enemies' crimes, for I preferred to bury in silence some of the atrocious acts of which they were guilty rather than reveal them; I did so despite the fact that they were true, lest I run the danger of being taken for a slanderer. Since it is not only my person, my Lords, which is the target of this ban making me the prey of barbarians, but obviously in attacking me it is the Republic and the authority of this entire country which they seek to hurt; since what we see now are not just slanderous little pamphlets written by nobodies, whose defamations no more affected me than the bite of a little snake which one crushes under foot rather than slay it with weapons, but falsehoods and calumnies by which men of great station reduce themselves to vile meanness—therefore I have deemed it utterly necessary to speak out. I do not want our common fatherland, for which I am ready to risk my life as I already have risked my estates, to suffer by my silence, and I want the eyes of those who judge the affairs of this world more by shadows and appearances than by the firmness

and solidity of reason not to be dazzled by the illustrious titles of so many kingdoms and countries extending to Arica and Asia.

I am quite aware that he who has put me under the ban has a number of advantages over me. Of these, the two most important are his high rank, so far surpassing my own, and that he whom he praises is himself. My foe may have for his part whatever gives him pleasure In such advantages, and I will take what is hard and despised by the world for my own. But I hope, my Lords, that your accustomed favor and affection toward me will protect me from suffering by either of his advantages, for you have long since learned by experience that high and illustrious rank when stained by tyranny makes little impression upon the hearts of free and generous men.

On the other hand, you who know me in the ordinary course of my life are aware that I no more like to find fault in others than to praise myself. But if I must do one or the other, as it seems I must, then if with all the modesty that I can muster, I still do something which is not wholly befitting, you should put the blame, my Lords, upon the compulsions which my enemies place me under and not upon my character, and therefore you should lay all guilt upon their impudence and contumely. You will recall, my Lords, that I am falsely accused of being “ungrateful, unfaithful, a hypocrite, the likes of Judas and Cain, a disturber of the country, a rebel, a foreigner, an enemy of mankind, a pestilence upon all Christendom, a traitor, and a wicked person, that I may be slain like a wild beast and that a successful assassin or poisoner will be paid for his deed." It is for you to judge whether it is possible for me to clear myself of such calumnies without speaking of myself and others in a way that I am not wont to do. Nonetheless I have such confidence in the justice of my cause, in my integrity and loyalty to you and in your fairness, frankness, and knowledge of what I have said and done, that I ask of you only that you hear and judge this case and command as the laws, franchises, liberties, and privileges of the country require and as the people expect from your wisdom and integrity. This I beseech you to do by all that is holy and sacred and by your oath and duty to the country. I am certain that although I may be less than my enemies in some things, in this shall be so much their superior because they have sought to violate, break, and suppress your laws, your privileges, and liberties, while I, on the contrary, have worked with good heart and all fidelity to maintain and preserve them. . . .

You will see, my Lords, that my defense against this jumble of impudent and malign slanders, without which this ban would be only a whiff of smoke, is simple and plain. If the man you know me to be is the man described by my enemies, if I bear neither body or soul the colors in which the concoctor of this document paints me, then, my Lords, you who have known me since my youth and among whom I have spent all my years of manhood, close your ears at once and refuse to hear any word from my lips. But if on the contrary I have been more meritorious, more honest, more chaste, and less miserly than the authors of this infamous document or the persons who made it public, to wit, the Prince of Parma and his predecessors, whose deeds are only too well known to history, and if you know that I and my ancestors have been of greater worth than they and their ancestors, then you will believe that they begin by maligning me and that the rest of their accusations are no more credible than the first. For, I ask you, what is the purpose of such a long recital of slanders but to show the whole world that they can vilify and disparage one whom, by God's mercy, they have not been able to slay by poison or sword, nor deceive by promises and fool by idle hopes, and that they are striving to destroy him with the venom of tongues which have been trained since their youth in this infamous trade? . . .

Not only have they addressed themselves to me personally, accusing me of ingratitude and infidelity, but in their rage and fury they have turned their attack equally upon all, making no distinction between the innocent and those who are presumed guilty. So great has been their effrontery that they have made my wife's honor their target by impugning the validity of my recent marriage. I do not know whether I find their impudence or their stupidity worse, for these learned men who boast of their skill with words forgot to listen to what young school boys chant all the time, "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." If they are aware of these faults and nevertheless try to pretend that thistles and thorn bushes are really rosebushes, then they are stupid and insolent; but if they aren't, how stupid can they be not to see what everyone else has before his eyes all the time? Every day they see an incestuous king who differs only half a degree from Jupiter, who married Juno, his own sister, and they dare reproach me with a marriage which is holy, honest, and lawful, in accordance with God's laws, and which was celebrated according to the ordinances of God's church! Now I must ask you, my Lords, to realize that I am doing something now which you never saw me do before. I am moved by

slander to reveal these horrible ulcers and cut into them with the cautery for all the world to see: but I beg of you to put the blame for what I do upon the rage and desperate fury of men who are enemies of God and all Christendom, and especially of yourselves, men who have turned their wrath upon me only because they know how active, diligent, and loyal I have been in your defense. . . .

[The Apology continues with charges of bigamy and adultery against Philip II.]

The objection is raised that I am a foreigner in the Low Countries. As if the Prince of Parma, who was not born in this country, who owns not a shilling's worth of land here, and possesses not a single title here, but who commands some dunderheads with a rod of iron and makes those who obey him into slaves, was a great patriot. But what does the word "foreigner" mean? It means someone who was not born in the country. Then the king is as much a foreigner as I, for he was born in Spain, a country which is the natural enemy of the Netherlands, and I was born in Germany, a neighboring country which is its natural friend. They will reply that he is a king, and I will reply that here I do not know this title of "king." He may be a king in Castile, Aragon, Naples, the Indies and wherever he commands according to his own pleasure; if he wants, he can be a king in Jerusalem or even a peaceful ruler in Asia and Africa. But in this country I know only of a duke and a count whose power is limited by the privileges which he swore at his Joyous Entry. As for my position, it is well known. My predecessors, from whom I am descended in the direct masculine line, became the possessors of the counties and baronies of Luxemburg, Brabant, Flanders, and Holland. Before about the year 1340 Count Otto, from whom I am descended in the seventh degree and whose eldest heir I am, married the Countess of Vianden, and ever since the county of Vianden remained in our house and we enjoyed peaceful possession of it until the king deprived me unjustly of it. Afterward Count Engelbert I, grandson of this Count Otto, married the Lady of Lek and Breda, and I am also descended from him in the direct masculine line in the fifth degree. Can I rightly be called a foreigner then? Nor need I mention at the moment my estates in Burgundy, of which I have a good share, thank God. I leave it to you, my Lords, who know our laws better than anyone else in the world, to judge whether, according to the usages of our ancestors from time immemorial, the Lords of Ravenstein, Luxemburg, St. Paul, Nevers, Etampes, and others who held counties and baronies in this

country were considered to be foreigners, and whether even today you do not consider as natives all those who possess such lordships, providing that they are willing to take this country's side. Is this not even a specific law among us in Brabant, as well as elsewhere?

[Further arguments for the proprietary rights of the ancestors of the Prince of Orange over those of the House of Habsburg in the Low Countries.]

They say "that from the time the King left these Netherlands, I have tried by sinister practices, plots, and wiles to win the good will of the Malcontents, and of men who are in debt, those who hate justice, who seek after novelties and especially those who are suspected of being adherents of the [Reformed] Religion." As for those who profess the Protestant religion, I admit that I have never hated them. It was the religion I was brought up in from the cradle; my father lived and died in it after having expelled the abuses of the Church from his lands. Who then will find it strange that this doctrine is so engraved in my heart and that it put down such roots that in time it bore fruit? But I was brought up for many years in the Emperor's chamber, and then when I became old enough to bear arms, I was at once given high posts and my head was filled more with thoughts of weapons, hunting, and the other activities of young noblemen than with what concerned the salvation of my soul. Yet I have great reason to give thanks to God, who did not permit this holy seed which he himself planted in me to be choked. I can say too that the cruel execution of Protestants by fire, the sword, or drowning, which was then only too common, was never to my liking. The author or painter of this infamous ban calls the Protestants "persons of the Religion," and although everywhere else he flatters, lies, or slanders, he uses his words quite well when he calls them this, for Protestantism is the only religion which truly deserves the name; it is an admission which was torn from his lips by its great force and the efficacy of its truth.

When I was in France I was told by King Henry that the Duke of Alva was negotiating about ways to exterminate all suspected Protestants in France, in this country, and throughout Christendom. When King Henry, who thought that because I was one of the commissioners for the peace treaty and was informed of important matters I was also a party to this affair, revealed to me the true intentions of the King of Spain and the Duke of Alva, I replied in such a way that the king would not lose his esteem for me as someone from whom things had been concealed,

and in his trust of me he therefore continued to discourse at length so that I could grasp what the Inquisitors really had in mind. I admit that I was moved by pity and compassion for so many worthy persons doomed to slaughter, and for this country to which I owed so much, into which they planned to introduce the Inquisition in a form even worse and more cruel than it was in Spain, and I confess that when I saw the nets put out to trap both the nobles of the country as well as the common people, and that no escape was possible, since one had to do no more than look askance at an image to be sentenced to burn at the stake, I deliberately began my endeavor of helping to drive those Spanish vermin from the country. I have never regretted that I did so but consider that my companions and I, and all the others who supported this meritorious enterprise, performed an act worthy of immortal praise, and that we would have achieved our entire purpose and risen to the heights of honor if we had slammed the door shut upon them after their departure, if we had found the means to rid the country of them so that they would never have come back. . . .

[Description of his negotiations and their failures and successes, and of his defeats and victories. The illegal seizure of his eldest son, William Philip, a student at Leiden university who was taken to Spain; the violations of the privileges of the Order of the Golden Fleece.]

You know, my Lords, the duties to which the King is bound and that he cannot do whatever he pleases, as he can in the Indies. Under the privileges of Brabant, he cannot compel a single one of his subjects to do anything by means of force except in accordance with the usages of the court of justice which has jurisdiction over him. He cannot change the constitution of the country by ordinance or decree in any way. He must be satisfied with his ordinary revenues and may not establish or collect any taxes without the approval and the express consent of the country given in accordance with its privileges. He cannot bring soldiers into the country without its consent. He cannot change the value of money without the consent of the States assemblies of the country. He cannot order the arrest of any subject without a hearing by the local magistrate, nor can he have a prisoner sent out of the country

They add the charge "that I introduced freedom of conscience." If they mean that I permitted the kind of impieties which are habitual in the Prince of Parma's house, where atheism and other Roman virtues have free play, then I reply that is among the heirs of Lord Peter Lewis

that such freedom, or rather such unbridled license, is to be sought. But I do indeed confess that I have never liked to watch so many poor Christians tortured, although it gave delight to the Duke of Alva and the Spaniards, and that I favored halting persecution in the Low Countries. I will admit further, so that my foes may know that they have to do with one who speaks frankly and without pretense, that the King, as he was leaving for Zeeland, his last stop in this country, ordered me to put to death several worthy persons suspected of being Protestants, and that I did not do it but instead sent warnings to them. I know that I could not do what I had been commanded to do in good conscience and that I had to obey God before men. Let the Spaniards say what they will, I know that what I have done will be praised and approved by other peoples and nations as good as they, who have learned that fire and sword bring little profit. But you, my Lords, have since approved what I did, condemning, with the universal consent of the people, the rigor of the ordinances and halting such cruel executions, and therefore I care not one whit for the grumbling of the Spaniards and their adherents.

But I cannot but be astounded by their stupidity in shamelessly blaming me for the massacre of Catholics. Not only are they unaware that such violence is wholly foreign to my character, but they do not know, as you and everyone else knows full well, that it was by my command and decree that some who were guilty of such excesses as they impute to me were put to death, and that others, notable members of illustrious houses, were arrested by persons in my own service and were later released from the long imprisonment to which they had been sentenced for their crimes only out of regard to the houses of which they had the honor to be members. But what was done by my order is so well known to all that they cannot disguise or conceal it; yet they have learned to state the truth in ways useful to themselves and say that when I did something virtuous, I was only pretending. Who told them that I was pretending? Who revealed my secret purposes to them? They have seen what I did but they cannot judge my heart, and there is no man, however malicious, except the author of this document or a Spaniard, who should not base his judgment upon what he sees rather than upon what he maliciously suspects.

They heap a multitude of accusations upon our religion and call us heretics, but they have been trying to prove this for a long time and have got almost nowhere. Their slanders are like the words which men speak in the heat of anger and which do not deserve a reply. Of all their

slanders, the one which least deserves an answer is the stupid charge that I have not trusted any priest or monk unless he married and that I even forced them to wed. Who does not know that in their unbridled fury and passion they will pick up anything they find in the roadway to throw at me? Yet, even if these things were true (which they are not) and based on reason (for we are taught by our religion that marriage should be free, neither forced nor forbidden), they would still not compare with that tyrannizing over conscience which forbids a part of Christendom to marry, against the resistance not only of the Eastern Churches but also the churches of Germany and France

They upbraid me because "I have great authority among the people." Far from being ashamed of it, I deeply regret that I did not have greater influence and that I was not always able to persuade them to do what I repeatedly proposed in speech and writing. If they had done what I proposed, I would have long since cleansed this country of the Spanish filth with God's help. But if the people are as they describe them and I am as they describe me (which I will assume, to make them happy), then they cannot help but admit that their tyrannies and cruelty must have been enormous in every way to have earned them the universal hatred of the whole people, who earlier had held them in such affection and had been so loyal to their predecessors and even to them before they committed these excesses. If, on the contrary, the people willingly chose me to be the defender of their freedom, what else can be said by foreign nations or posterity except that the people believed that there was something in me worthy of such hatred? I admit therefore that I am popular and will be for the rest of my life. I admit, that is, that I will seek, I will maintain, I will defend your freedom and your privileges. . . .

I am also flabbergasted that they forget to repeat the accusation of hating the nobility which so many little lying writers of clumsy slanders and libels have made against me. Do I begin by hating myself, my relatives, and my friends, who are, thank God, all of ancient, noble, and illustrious race and of such high rank and great wealth that I do not fear comparison with our enemies, few of whom can match us in eminence? But experience has shown whether or not I am doing everything in my power for the advancement of the nobles. If I foresaw long ago that certain ambitious persons, who have since departed from our midst, wished to seize the government and its offices in order to abandon the country and betray their oaths, if, knowing

their frivolity, vanity, and inconstancy, and their fondness for tyranny, I did not support them and thus helped to preserve the best, largest, and healthiest part of our state, this did not mean that I hated or scorned the nobility but that I wished with their aid to prevent the ruin of the country which was so close upon us. Their fathers were wiser, braver, and more virtuous than my accusers and they were my good friends. If they were still alive, they would be mortified at the sight of a race which has abandoned the constancy and virtue of its ancestors, who lived honorably and without reproach; especially if they also saw that they were looked upon everywhere as vacillators and great bargainers, and that the Spaniards whom they serve and the Cardinal whom they flit around make child's play of them, leading them by the nose like animals, supporting them until it is time to return the statues, instruments, tapestry, and other furnishings which they have taken from them, and then the time comes to send them to the slaughterhouse. All this is proved by letters they have written in their own hands, which you have seen and recognized, my Lords

[The Apology ends with William's point-by-point defiance of threats against his person in the ban.]

Therefore, my Lords, if you believe that either my absence or my death can serve you, I am ready to obey. Here is my head, over which no prince or monarch has power: use it for your welfare, your safety, the defense of your republic. But if you consider that this modicum of experience and industry which I have acquired in long and arduous toil, and what remains of my estates or my life, can still serve you (for I dedicate them all to you and consecrate them to the country), then make your decisions upon the points I have proposed to you. If you believe that I bear some love to the fatherland, that I have some competence as a counselor, then you should believe that this is the only way to protect and save yourselves. When you have done these things, continue together with good heart and will, embrace together the defense of this good people who ask only good counsel and the opportunity to follow it. If, doing this, you still continue to show me the favor which you have given until now, I hope, with your aid and by God's grace (which I have so often felt in times of perplexity before this), that what you will

decide will serve your welfare and the defense of yourselves, your wives and children, and all sacred and holy things.

JE LE MAINTIENDRAI

(I will uphold it," the motto of the house of Orange-Nassau)