A Product of Their Time: 
Analyzing The Role of Philip II in the Dutch Revolt

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Overview and Educational Objective

Objectives: The following document provides a brief introduction to the origins of the Dutch Revolt and a series of primary sources that address Philip II’s role in the revolt. The purpose of this collection of sources is to ask students to detect bias, point of view, and argument.

Intended Audience: Advanced Placement European History Students

Three Sections:
1. Historical Background
2. Primary Sources
3. Secondary Sources

Scholarly Works
1. Contemporary Textbooks
Introduction and Historical Background

In 1556 the Low Countries, a region comprised of modern Netherlands and Belgium, broke out in revolt against the ruling Spanish Hapsburgs. The Low Countries were no strangers to foreign rule, having never been autonomous as they are in their modern state. The region had been ruled during the Middle Ages by the Burgundians, a state whose home base was in Northern France and their rule in the region was decentralized. The Burgundians recognized that the region, despite its small size and water-logged geographical limitations, was an ideal defensive and offensive location in Northern Europe in addition to having a fiscally sound tax base.¹

In the early 16th Century, control of the Low Countries transferred to the Habsburgs and became part of the Holy Roman Empire, whose territories included Germany, Spain, Italy, and soon the New World. Driven by the military and fiscal necessities of the 1500s, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V sought to centralize Hapsburg rule over the Low Countries. He expanded the territory gained from the Burgundians to the West and South through a series of military campaigns. He

consolidated control over the Flemish legal system and tax collecting mechanisms. He established the office of Stadtholder to carry out his laws and edicts.²

Just as the Burgundians had previously recognized, the Habsburgs viewed the Low Countries as a particularly valuable tract of territory in terms of its geopolitical location and wealth.³ The region that is today modern Belgium emerged from the Renaissance with a wealthy, urban, and skilled population. Their main source of wealth was what historians have referred to as the rich trades: spices from the east via the Mediterranean, fine cloth from domestic industries, engraving, printing, and other types of production that required skilled labor for the production of luxury goods.⁴ The entrepôt at Antwerp made its wealth visible through Renaissance inspired architecture and art.⁵ The advancement was so impressive that some historians have commented that the Low Countries was a cosmopolitan region ruled by a series relatively backwards states.⁶ The northern regions, the modern Netherlands, we're not as wealthy (yet) as their southern neighbors. The source of their wealth was from shipping bulk goods, mainly timber and grain from the Baltic regions. Both the North and the South, but particularly the latter, served as a valuable tax base for the Spanish Habsburgs.

Despite Charles V’s centralizing actions, his reign should not be viewed as absolutist either in methods or goals. Charles V had larger issues on his mind, mainly the encroaching Ottoman threat in the East and the Mediterranean and the growing military power of France, which challenged the Holy Roman Empire in Italy. Charles V was willing to cut deals with the local ruling elite in the Low Countries, allowing them to maintain their local privileges.⁷ This decision was indicative of a larger trend in the history of the Low Countries: regional particularism. Though they had been ruled by larger powers, each town, city, and province in the Low Countries had a distinct sense of local culture and carefully guarded its political autonomy.⁸ While it is dangerous to make generalizations, local governments in the Low Countries were often controlled by representative bodies filled with merchant elite and/or comprised of the most powerful guilds in a city. Charles V was able to negotiate with these bodies for higher taxes to

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⁴ Ibid, 116-119.
fund his wars against the Ottomans and the French, partly by returning power piecemeal to the local ruling classes through their existing political institutions. This is not to say that Charles was always willing to compromise with these local governments, as was shown by his military repression of the rebellion in Ghent in the late 1530s. 

Catholic Church power was thin in the Netherlands, having only two bishoprics to serve the entire region. Charles V made few moves to address what would become one of the thorniest issues of all: the Reformation. Humanist scholars led by the Erasmus of Rotterdam, paved the way for more heretical Lutheran and Calvinist thought. A small, but vocal minority of Protestants existed in the Low Countries by the end of the Catholic Charles V’s reign.

When the Holy Roman Emperor Habsburg Charles V resigned, he determined that his empire was too large for one government, and indeed one monarch, to rule. He split his empire between his brother and his son: the German states and other territories were assigned to the former, Ferdinand I, who became the Holy Roman Emperor. The Spanish Habsburg territories of Spain, the Low Countries, and the New World went to his son Philip II. It was during the reign of Phillip II that the revolt broke out.

Modern historians debate to this day as to what was the most significant cause of the Dutch Revolt. It began in fits and starts, with the first violence occurring in 1566 with iconoclast riots, though truly organized military rebellion did not begin until 1572. Explanations range from economic and political to religious and cultural, with each tension aggravating other sectors of Flemish life. In the 1550s the long-term sources of potential tension between the Low Countries and Spain came to the forefront. Presented here, in no particular order, are some of the most prominent factors.

Whereas Charles V had spent a fair amount of time in the Netherlands, raising his sons there alongside Dutch and Flemish elite, Philip II set up his court at his new palace, the Escorial, in Spain. This choice led the Dutch, especially after the revolt was in full swing, to accuse Philip of being disinterested in the political and cultural institutions in the Low Countries. Meanwhile,
Philip’s Governor General, who ruled alongside his Philip’s half-sister Margaret of Parma in his stead, stopped consulting the Council of States, which was made up of the nobility of the Low Country. This trope of Philip’s apathy was aggravated by the fact that when a group of Dutch elite sent a letter protesting the political and religious impositions (addressed below) through Margaret of Parma, he derided their complaints, referring to them as “beggars.”

The second difference between Philip and his father was Philip’s dedication to Catholicism and hatred of the Reformed religion. The continuing spread of the Reformation intensified fears in Spain that Catholicism was irreparable damaged. While there was intense regional variation in terms of commitment to Protestantism in the Low Countries, the reformation in the form of Lutherans, Calvinists, Mennonites, Anabaptists, and others had carved out distinct strongholds within the supposedly unified Catholic Spanish Empire. As a Jesuit, Philip II saw himself as a champion of the Counter-Reformation. He imposed the Inquisition in the Low Countries, which had ramifications beyond religious conflict.

The Inquisition was carried out in multiple ways. Philip sought to reorganize the bishoprics in the South and add bishoprics to the North to reflect population changes and pressure areas with Protestant sympathies. The Bishops served as Philip’s chief religious officials and political advisors during this effort and became early targets of the revolt. One in particular, Cardinal Granvelle, was maligned in many of the documents below. The reorganization and establishment of new bishoprics was even offensive to those who took a more apathetic or malleable view towards religion: they saw the new bishoprics as a way for Philip II to more effectively carry out his political agenda, while taking away power from local governing bodies and replacing them with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

The main thrust of the Inquisition was led by perhaps the most hated Spanish official during the Dutch Revolt: The Duke of Alva. Alva was sent to the Netherlands after the beeldenstrom, a wave of violent iconoclasm, or the breaking of Catholic images and relics, directed against churches, monasteries, and nunneries. Alva was given the power to prosecute suspected heretics, imposing punishments such as the customary death and property confiscation. The

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15 Ibid, 148-150.
threat of property confiscation helped spread the revolt to the upper classes of Dutch society. Some notable officials were forced to flee to escape with their lives, if not their lands.\textsuperscript{16}

To add insult to injury, Spanish taxation and demands on the lands of the Low Countries increased at the same time as the Inquisition. Philip continued to need funds to fight the Ottomans in the Mediterranean, repel French expansionist tendencies, and pay for Alva’s troops as militant opposition to the Inquisition began. From the Spanish perspective, the Low Countries were an obvious military center. The region could serve as a tax base, quarter and feed standing armies, and strengthen existing fortifications along the French border to keep that enemy wary on all fronts.\textsuperscript{17} It had offensive and defensive capabilities unequal to any other Spanish Habsburg lands. Meanwhile, some historians have suggested that the Flemish saw little benefit to being part of the Spanish Habsburg empire and were not inclined to pay for far off naval battles in the Mediterranean. The issue of taxation became intertwined with the Inquisition itself when the tenth penny tax was instituted by Alva, making him a religiously and politically maligned figure.

Political particularism compounded all of the above existing tensions. Dutch politics during and after the revolt would continue to be thrown into confusion by competing levels of local, municipal, and provincial power that made collective action near impossible. Political and military resistance to Philip’s rule began in 1566 when the nobility of the Low Countries decided that they had no incentive to serve on the Council of State if their advice was not taken into account. Their opposition spread to the lesser nobles and Calvinist religious radicals began committing acts of violence.\textsuperscript{18} But it was not until 1576 that the Low Countries signed the Pacification of Ghent, a promise to form a loose confederation for the purpose of fighting the Spanish Army and form a States General. Within this lose alliance, the Stadtholder of Holland, William I of Orange, emerged as the man under whom (some of) the provinces were willing to unite (some of the time), buoyed by military successes earlier in the revolt.\textsuperscript{19}

Thus, the revolt became memorialized in the competing personalities of Philip II and William I. Philip was portrayed by the Dutch as religiously intransient, who had abandoned the Low Countries by choice. William I’s unimpeachable place in Dutch history as the leader of the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 158-159.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 165-167.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
revolt may have more to do with his assassination in 1584 than any stalwart ideological purity.\textsuperscript{20} Those that praised his memory in later year were more likely to invoke the liberal nature of his political and religious views.\textsuperscript{21} He was a \textit{politique} of the same caliber as Elizabeth I or the French Henry IV. Most notably, his rise did not turn the revolt into a straightforward battle between a Calvinist reformed church fighting against the excesses of a Catholic Church staunchly defended by Spain. William I was raised Catholic and, while he seemed to have Calvinist leanings, never made religion a rallying point of the Dutch Revolt. His antipathy, waffling, and lack of commitment to either the Catholic tradition or Reformed cause was reflected in the Dutch population.\textsuperscript{22}

Philip’s place in the revolt is not clear-cut either. Initially, most of the Dutch ire against the Spanish was directed at the Duke of Alva. The first unified Dutch proclamations against the Spanish maintained that they were still loyal to the Philip II, and were merely trying to overcome his corrupt ministers, rather than denying his sovereignty. At the same time, his letters to his sisters, the Duchess of Parma and Governor of the Netherlands at the outbreak of the revolt, reveal a more complex picture when it comes to the question of whether Philip was controlling his ministers, or they were controlling him. Then in 1576 when the unified Netherlanders declared their intention to break away from the Spanish empire, Philip II himself came under direct attack. Philip responded with a personal attack against William I and William responded in kind.\textsuperscript{23}

The revolt dragged on for decades. By the late 1570s, Philip had all but given up on subduing the North and focused on (successfully) bringing the Southern provinces back into his empire. The revolt did not officially end until 1648 with the signing of the Treaty of Munster, though the north received de facto independence in 1588. Known as the United Provinces, the north became an independent confederation of states, loosely united, sometimes under a Stadtholder from the House of Orange, sometimes under the States General, until it was conquered by Napoleon in 1806.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 96-101.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 210.
Today, historians still debate Philip’s role in the Dutch Revolt: was he entirely at fault, an unwitting player, or merely a monarch at the helm of an unwieldy empire? This collection of primary and secondary documents highlights the complicated relationship that the Dutch had with Philip II throughout the Dutch Revolt. The secondary sources show that even today vastly different interpretations exist regarding Philip’s personal culpability.

To what extent was Philip responsible for the revolt in the Netherlands? How have contemporaries and modern historians treated this issue?
Section 1: Primary Sources

Document 1: Letter from Phillip II to the Duchess Margaret of Parma, 1565
On October 17, 1565, Phillip II wrote from Spain to the Duchess of Parma, the Governor of the Netherlands and his half-sister, concerning the religious and civil unrest in the Low Countries.

… As to whether I would wish to ask the advice [on religious issues] of the private and great councils and of the governors and provincial councils [Of the Netherlands], this would be a considerable waste of time since my mind is made up. I have not asked others at all but followed the advice of [Bishops in the Netherlands appointed by Spain] as much as possible and as seemed fitting, and I have been very pleased to hear that you have already begun to apply the other canonical remedies, such as having good preachers and pastors, founding good schools and reforming the ecclesiastics in accordance with my instruction. …


Document 2: The Wilhelmus: The Dutch National Anthem
The Wilhelmus claims to be the oldest national anthem ever composed. It was written sometime between 1569 and 1572, after the revolt, but was likely based on older songs that would have been sung during the fight against the Spanish.

William of Nassau, scion
Of a Dutch and ancient line,
Dedicate undying
Faith to this land of mine
A prince I am, undaunted
Of Orange, ever free
To the king of Spain I've granted
A lifelong loyalty.
…
Nothing so moves my pity
As seeing through these lands
Field, village, town and city
Pillaged by roving hands
O that the Spaniards rape thee,
My Netherlands so sweet,
The thought of that does grip me
Causing my heart to bleed.
…
Unto the Lord His power
I do not confession make
That ne'er at any hour
of the King I spake.
But unto God, the greatest
Of Majesties I owe
Obedience first and latest,
For Justice wills it so.


Document 3: Certain Advice and Plain Declaration for His Majesty the King Concerning the Control and Safety of His State and the Commonweal and the Prosperity of the Country
A mystery surrounds this memorandum, which purports to be advice to Philip II with regard to his Netherlands possessions. Whoever composed the 'Advice' evidently knew the
Low Countries well and favoured a radical approach to the problems of the government of the Low Countries. Several candidates have been proposed as authors, including Cardinal Granvelle. ... The 'Advice' seems to have enjoyed a considerable circulation and Dutch as well as French manuscript texts survive ....

1. First and foremost the King should incorporate all the countries and provinces of these Low Countries in a kingdom and have himself crowned as king absolute [roy absolut] of the same, giving it the name and title of the kingdom of Low Germany or Germania inferior. …

2. His Majesty should make for the whole realm a fixed and universal law for the preservation and peace of our Catholic religion. This law should be made faithfully with the consent of all the peoples and provinces of the said realm. Of course the said general law should on no account be referred to as the term 'Spanish Inquisition', notwithstanding that the institution is in itself and by its origin holy and honourable.

…

4. The King should abolish and abrogate in all towns and cities of the said realm that custom of consultation known as the Broad Council [den Breeden Raedt]. All the disorders and popular disturbances, which have recently occurred, may be attributed to the instability and mutability of this kind of consultation. I am thinking chiefly of the towns of Antwerp, Amsterdam and Valenciennes, for they behaved so arrogantly and presumptuously in these councils that they dared, contrary to all reason, to lay down and prescribe the law to their King and Prince, as we have recently witnessed.


Document 4: William of Orange Calls for the Separation of the Low Countries from Spain, 1572

Early in 1572, a band of semi-piratical “Water-Beggars,” ..., captured [the port of Den Briel]] on April 1, and then a combined movement of fierce “Water-Beggars” and vehement Calvinists took over one town after another in Holland and Zeeland, seizing the chance that Alva had left few troops in the two provinces. The Prince of Orange ... responded to the opportunity too. On April 4, he issued a call to the inhabitants of the Low countries to rise against Alva.

We suffer with all our heart over the multitudinous and excessively cruel violences, the excessive burdens, taxes of ten, twenty, and thirty per cent, and other imposts, exactions, burdens, seizures, slayings, expulsions, confiscations, executions, and innumerable other unparalleled and intolerable inflictions, intimidations, and oppressions which the common enemy, with his Spaniards, bishops, inquisitors and other dependents, continues daily with unprecedented novelty and violence to inflict upon you, your wives, and your daughters, and your souls, bodies, and goods. After so many years, this now grows steadily worse
under the name of His Royal Majesty, but without his knowledge, in violation of his oath, and contrary to the liberties and privileges of the country, although in fact at the instigation of Cardinal Granvelle and the Spanish Inquisitors, whose purpose it is to put into effect the decisions of the Council of Trent and the Inquisition of Spain. … With these, after expelling the tyrannical oppressors, together we shall see the Netherlands in their ancient freedom, governed again without any violence, with proper obedience to the King and security for your consciences, and according to the advice of the States General. To achieve this, if you will help by giving yourselves over into our hands, we wish to contribute all our strength; but if you do not do so and bring shame, violence, and grief upon yourselves, we do not want to have the fault laid upon us.


Document 5: The Goals of William the Silent, the Prince of Orange, 1573

The following letter by the Prince of Orange is a reply to his brothers, John and Louis of Nassau, to whom terms were suggested; it sums up pithily a whole range of issues: William’s new commitment to Calvinism; his hatred of the Spaniards; the need to pay, or pay off, the mercenary soldiers on whom he depended; his distrust of Philip II; and, not least, his skepticism regarding assistance from Elizabeth of England.

My Dear Good Brothers, Counts John and Louis of Nassau, etc. I have received your letter and learned what the situation is from it as well as from the report of the person you sent to me. …To answer the points that you raise, you know quite well that it was never and is not now my intention to seek the slightest advantage for myself. I have only aspired and claimed to seek the country's freedom in the matters of religious conscience and government, in which the foreigners tried to oppress it. …. To achieve this [religious freedom] the foreigners in the government and the army, especially the Spaniards, must be driven out. ….If we are granted these points and given good assurances on them, then people will indeed see that I want nothing more than peace and public tranquility, and that I am not stubbornly pursuing some foolish notions of my own. The whole difficulty lies in the fact that although such assurances have been repeatedly given in the past, those who gave them also took Oaths not to keep such contracts, being confident that they would be absolved from them by the Pope and therefore were not bound by them.


Document 6: Pacification of Ghent, 1576

After the loss of the North to the rebels, the Duke of Alba was replaced in the South but Spain still failed to pacify the two most important Southern provinces, Flanders and Brabant. A mutiny of Spanish soldiers and massacre in Antwerp in November of 1576, known as the ‘Spanish Fury,’ finally produced a temporary peace settlement, known as the Pacification of Ghent... Philip II’s new governor of the Low Countries, Don Juan of
Austria, was required to swear to uphold the Pacification. Thus, it appeared that the provinces of the Netherlands were now reunited and that the main aims of the rebels, religious toleration and local self-government. Legal sovereignty, however, remained with the Spanish crown.

… instead of the relief and compassion which it was hoped His Majesty would give us, the Spaniards continued every day their oppression and impoverishment of the poor subjects and tried to reduce them to perpetual enslavement by arousing sedition among them, going so far as to threaten the Lords and the cities and seizing several places by hostile force, which they sometimes looted and burned. This is why those to whom the government of this country was entrusted have declared the Spaniards to be enemies of His Majesty and of the public good, and the States of these provinces were compelled, with the consent of these deputies, to take up arms and adopt other measures to prevent total ruin, and in order that the inhabitants of these Low Countries, being joined together in a firm peace and agreement, may by common action drive out the Spaniards and their adherents as the destroyers of this land and restore these subjects to the enjoyment of their rights, privileges, customs, and liberties, by which means their trade and their prosperity may flourish again.


Document 7: The Act of Abjuration: Edict of the States general of the United Netherlands by which they declare that the king of Spain has forfeited the sovereignty and government of the a-foresaid Netherlands, July 26, 1581

The Act of Abjuration of 1581 is sometimes known as the Declaration of Independence of the Dutch Republic.

... The Act argued that the Spanish King had failed to respect the historic rights and privileges of the Low Countries and thus they sought a new sovereign. ... The Act is important because it was the most explicit statement of the doctrine of the right of a people to throw over a tyrant and establish its own form of government until the Declaration of Independence of 1776.

And this we have seen done frequently in several countries upon the like occasion, and more justifiable in our land, which has been always governed according to their ancient privileges, which are expressed in the oath taken by the prince at his admission to the government; for most of the Provinces receive their prince upon certain conditions, which he swears to maintain, which, if the prince violates, he is no longer sovereign. Now thus it was that the king of Spain after the demise of the emperor, his father, Charles the Fifth, of the glorious memory (of whom he received all these provinces), forgetting the services done by the subjects of these countries, both to his father and himself, by whose valor he got so glorious and memorable victories over his enemies that his name and power became famous and dreaded over all the world, forgetting also the advice of his said imperial majesty, made to him before to the contrary, did rather hearken to the counsel of those Spaniards about him, who had conceived a secret hatred to this land and to its
liberty, because they could not enjoy posts of honor and high employments here under the states as in Naples, Sicily, Milan and the Indies, and other countries under the king's dominion. … From that time forward the king of Spain, following these evil counselors, sought by all means possible to reduce this country (stripping them of their ancient privileges) to slavery, …


**Document 8: The Proscription of William the Silent, 1580**

*On March 15, 1580, Phillip II issued the following edict, which called for the elimination of the leader of the Revolt of the Netherlands by assassination. An assassination attempt in 1882 wounded him and an attack on July 10, 1584 in Delft killed him.*

For these most just, right, and legitimate reasons and making use of the authority which we have over the said Orange both by virtue of the oaths of fidelity and obedience which he has often made to us and because we are absolute prince and sovereign of the said Low Countries, for all his perverse and baneful acts and because he alone is chief author and promoter of the troubles there and the principal disturber of our state, in brief is the plague of the Christian community, we do declare him to be a wicked traitor and an enemy to ourselves and the country. As such we have proscribed and do proscribe him for all time from our said countries and from all our other states, kingdoms, and lordships. …


**Document 9: The ‘Apology ’Or Defense of William of Orange Against The Ban Or Edict of The King of Spain, 1581**

*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.*

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. . . . 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 [Henry] 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. ..

Part Two: Secondary Sources


J.H. Elliot is the preeminent American historian on Spain in Early Modern Europe. His work *Imperial Spain* covers Spain’s world empire during its rise, height, and decline.

While Spain in the early 1560’s was slowly and painfully building up its strength in the Mediterranean, it was receiving a number of increasingly sharp reminders that Islam was not its only enemy, nor its eastern and southern coastlines the only frontiers open to attack. The spread of Calvinism and the outbreak of the French Wars of Religion in 1562 raised for the first time the specter of a Protestant power on Spain’s northern border. This itself was serious enough, but worse was to follow. Discontent was spreading in the Spanish Netherlands. Pressure from the Dutch nobility had induced Philip to remove Cardinal Granvelle from the government in the Netherlands in 1564; heresy was spreading among the inhabitants; and in August 1566 Calvinist mobs ran wild and sacked churches. Philip, in fact, was faced with both heresy and rebellion in one of the most prized portions of his father’s inheritance.

The news from Brussels confronted a congenitally indecisive monarch with the need to make a series of crucial decisions. Should he return to Flanders to reimpose his authority in person? Should he adopt a policy of moderation, as Cardinal Espinosa and the Prince of Eboli recommended in the Council of State, or should he order military action against the rebels, as urged by the Duke of Alba and the Count of Chinchon? Military action required money, but fortunately the Crown’s financial position had recently begun to improve. … With a new confidence born of new resources, the King decided in favour of repression. The Duke of Alba was ordered to the Netherlands with an army to suppress the revolt; and in spite of the success of the governess of the Netherlands, Charles V’s daughter Margaret of Parma, in restoring order among her rebellious subjects, the Duke was instructed to continue his march.

Before the departure of Alba there had been some uncertainty whether he was ostensibly going to the Netherlands to destroy heresy or to crush revolt. It was finally decided that the war in the Netherlands was best treated as a war against rebellious vassals; but in practice Philip and his soldiers looked upon it was a religious crusade undertaken by a “Catholic army” against a people whom Philip himself persistently described as “rebels and heretics.” For Philip, heresy and rebellion were synonymous – and not without reason. Everywhere he looked, the Calvinists were subverting the established order. Calvinist preachers were stirring up the populace; Calvinist literature was poisoning men’s minds. In the Netherlands, in France, the forces of international Protestantism were on the march. That it was an international conspiracy, Philip had no doubt, for each passing year showed more conclusively that the Dutch rebels were not alone. Behind them were the Huguenots, and the Breton seamen who were now waging war on Spain. …


Parker takes an international approach to the Spanish Empire under Philip II in The Grand Strategy of Philip II. He argues that Philip II had an overarching, relatively successful plan for governing his multinational empire that was closely adhered to by himself and his ministers.

At much the same time [as reforms were instituted in South America], Philip’s ministers in the Low Countries began to overhaul the legal system and introduced new taxes there too. In January 1568, just before the Junta Magna began to meet, the Duke of Alba, Philip’s governor-general in the Netherlands, wrote that he intended to implement the king’s instructions to ‘place these provinces under a single [system of] law and customs’, creating (as Alba put it) ‘a new world’. In just over two years new legislation both unified the criminal law and standardized the procedure in criminal trials throughout the Low Countries, while over a hundred local customs were codified. At the same time, at Philip’s insistence, Alba proposed new taxes to the representative assemblies of the Netherlands in order to balance his budget and end his financial dependence on Spain. One was ‘the Hundredth penny’, a 1 percent tax on all capital, collected as a percentage of the yield of each investment during the year 1569-1570 rather than on its declared value (thus discouraging undervaluation): it has been hailed as the ‘most modern tax ever levied in early modern Europe.” The duke also proposed a 10 per cent sales tax, known as the ‘tenth penny’ and as the alcabala. He justified these new taxes in terms remarkably similar to those used shortly afterwards in Philip’s decree of November 1671 for all Spanish America, which ordered ‘viceroys, presidents, and judges of our Audiences, and governors of the provinces of Peru, New Spain, Chile, Popayan, New Granada and of all other parts of our Indies to impose a sales tax. … An imperial government that could, with a single order and a single justification, impose a new tax on an entire continent thousands of kilometers away, and at the same time introduce innovative levies in the Low Countries, hundreds of kilometers distant in another direction, possessed both the vision and the machinery to use a Grand Strategy.”


Jonathan Israel’s monumental history of the early modern Dutch Republic is the standard work of the subject in English and is recognized as such even by scholars in the Netherlands. It provides a wide-ranging narrative and synthesis based on a thorough knowledge of the secondary literature in Dutch and major European languages as well as upon a great deal of original research in Dutch archives.

During the 1540s, and still more in the 1550s, it became obvious that the Netherlands was, from many points of view, the ideal strategic base for Habsburg power in Europe. Not
only were transportation, and the logistics of war, more easily and efficiently handled in the Low Countries than in Italy, not only was it easier to feed, and supply, troops there, and obtain cash at short notice, but the geography of the Low Countries – in the conditions of warfare of the time – was particularly favorable. … In short, once armed and primed, the Netherlands was the strategic base of Europe par excellence. If she based her military might there, Spain had a permanent, built in advantage [against France].


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Phillip's return to Spain was neither a sign of his undervaluing the Netherlands, nor underestimating the crisis which now engulfed the northern part of his world-monarchy. On the contrary, he was convinced the situation in the Low Countries, above all regarding religion, was extremely grave. But he also believed, with some justification, the whole of the Spanish monarchy was in the midst of a crisis. He had defeated France – just. But France still appeared stronger and likely to continue to challenge Spain's supremacy and be a vast drain on Phillip's resources. Besides this, he had to confront the growing Ottoman offensive in the Mediterranean, hampered by decades of neglect of Spain's defenses in the south, and innumerable financial and administrative problems in Spain itself. Philip returned to Castile not only set on reviving his galley fleets in the Mediterranean, and organizing a counter-offensive against the advance of Islam, but convinced that only by reasserting royal authority, and husbanding resources, in Spain, would he be able to rescue his empire as a whole, including the Netherlands, from imminent disintegration.


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Philip put his first package of financial demands to the States General in March 1556. The crown's financial exigency was now such that the king demanded the unheard of some of 3 million guilders to be raised through direct levies on assessed well including a 100th Penny, or 1%, levy on fixed property and 2% of liquid assets. The provinces headed by Brabant, refused. ... Convinced that the Netherlands was paying too much, compared with Spain and Spanish Italy, and that the war was being fought more in the interest of Spain and Italy then the Low Countries, the delegations spent their time airing their grievances. The king was mightily displeased.


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Alva arrived, in August, at the head of 10,000 Spanish and Neapolitan troops, supplemented by German auxiliaries. By then, not only had all visible sign of Protestant activities ceased, but many of those linked to Brederode's rebellion or the freedom of conscience agitation had fled, or been driven underground. But neither Alva, nor the king, was satisfied with this. Philip had felt driven to send an army to the Netherlands at a time of difficulty in danger for the Spanish Empire in the Mediterranean. The drain on Spain's resources was such that there was little prospect, with the war against the Ottoman to continuing, that the strain of keeping an army in the Low Countries could be sustained for a long. Whilst a powerful force was available, the crown was determined to use it to such effect that subversion and conspiracy would be – if not eradicated – at least crush sufficiently to rent another one to quiescent, secure, and reliably Catholic for the foreseeable future.

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Philip and Alba strove to suppress heresy and sedition through the Conseil des Troubles and its commissions in each province. In addition, the country had to be made secure against internal, and external, enemies without heaping too much of the financial burden on Castile. Thus, a sizable standing army had to be maintained for the time being and to pay for it, the king deemed it essential that more revenue be released from the Netherlands. The military strategy adopted by Alba and approved by the King – splitting the army into small contingents, billeting troops on towns, and building citadels to overawe towns throughout the Netherlands – only intensified the need to step up fiscal pressure. But most vital of all in Phillips eyes, the key ingredient, with the program to revive the Catholic Church in the Netherlands and assisted in winning back the hearts and minds of the populace. The intimidation of the country was just a means to an end.

Ultimately, Philip hoped to transform the Netherlands into a secure bastion of Spanish power which would simultaneously serve as a bulwark against the spread of heresy. He held no illusions that he could eradicate Protestantism completely. But the repression proved it was possible, not just to hold the country by force, but to drive Protestant activity underground and curtail, if not stop, publication and distribution of heretical literature. A combination of severity and energetic government support for reform and reorganization of the church, could perhaps, in time, lead to effective re-Catholicization of Netherlands society.


**Document 18: Herbert Rowan, The Low Countries in Early Modern Times, 1972**

Herbert H. Rowan was a leading scholar of the history of the Early Modern Low Countries in the United States and spent most of his career as a Professor of Early Modern European History at Rutgers University. This volume of selected and edited primary documents on the early modern history of the Low Countries is the only work available in English that treats the entire period. ... The book begins with an excellent brief introduction to the subject as a whole and includes short essays before each section as well as brief introductions for each document. The result of Rowen’s careful scholarship is a volume that can be read by non-specialists and provides an excellent source for documents on the history of the Low Countries.

After Charles V, worn out by the cares of a world-wide Empire, abdicated in Brussels in 1555, he was succeeded in the Low Countries, as in Spain, by his elder son, Philip II. Where the father was a man who combined stubbornness on what he saw as essentials with flexibility on tactics, the son was a narrower man, equally tenacious but lacking the familiarity with local conditions that Charles had acquired by constant travel. Philip was a Spaniard through and through, where the emperor had been a European and a dynast above all. Philip remained in the low countries until 1559, when the French acknowledged their defeat on the battlefield by excepting the Peace of Cateau-Cambresis; then he sailed to Spain, never to return. He acquired no fondness for the Netherlands, no intimacy with the great nobles and the wider regions of the people which could tie the nation and the king to each other by infection and understanding…. All the forces that Charles V had successfully kept down – resistance to persecution of heretics, localism and provincialism hostile to centralization within the Low Countries, and in incipient nationalism equally hostile to foreign overlordship – welled up against the person of Granvelle [whom Philip appointed upon his departure].

This is one of two relatively recent history surveys available in English that treats the Low Countries as a whole from Roman times to the present. It is an amended and translated version of a popular university text in Dutch. It is well written, accessible and contains many useful pictures and maps.

From the earliest days of the Reformation, new and diverse religious movements had found support in the large Brabantine and Flemish cities, and the effort by the Spanish administration to root out religious dissent was antithetical to the open mentality which existed in the cities. The growing absolutist tendencies of Spanish authority were also a major source of resentment among local nobility and burghers who cherished their autonomy. Thus one could argue that the conflict was essentially between two fundamentally opposed civilizations, between the Castellan nobility, steeped in the spirit of the *Reconquista* and colonial acquisition, and the progressive world of trade and commerce which nourished the many new cultural impulses of the Renaissance.

The personality of King Philip II also unquestionably contributed to the sharpening of the conflict. In his view, Protestants were heretics and the proponents of representative government were rebels. He refused to negotiate with such people, and as a result, peaceful solutions – despite the many efforts to find them – invariably ran afoul of Phillips refusal to compromise.

Document 20: Andrew Pettegree, *Religion and the Revolt, 2001*

The following excerpt is taken from a collection of essays on the causes of the Dutch Revolt published in 2001. This historian refers to foreign influences and suggests that the Dutch nobility tried to turn religious divisions to their own political advantage, unleashing popular revolt in 1566.

Ironically, Netherlandish Calvinism in the 1560s was largely a creation of the ruthless repression of Charles V’s later years, but was no more than a shadow of its French counterpart. The French Religious Wars has a profound impact in the Netherlands, giving
the Dutch nobility an example of how political crisis could be turned to their own advantage. Consumed with their own exclusion from power, and anxious to show the absent Philip II their indispensability, they began to associate themselves with calls for a relaxation of the laws against heresy. Emboldened by open revolt in France, Dutch Calvinist communities were increasingly willing to resort to attacking Catholic images. To the nobility, iconoclasm was a powerful signal that the forces they had unleashed posed a real threat to the established political order.

**Document 21: Patrick Williams, Philip II, 2001**

This excerpt is taken from a biography of Philip II published in 2001. This historian argues that Philip was forced to take determined action in 1567 as his previous concessions had endangered his inheritances in the Netherlands.

Rebellion was an insult to the King’s majesty. Philip had been forced to retreat on a number of key issues in the years since 1561, such as the recall of Spanish troops, the dismissal of Granvelle and the moderations of his religious policy. He had now been driven to the point where he would retreat no more. The Netherlands were part of the inheritance to which his father had committed him. He was immovably determined to preserve what remained of it. Philip’s policy towards the Netherlands sprang from his obligations as King of Spain; but equally he had a duty to the Netherlands. Philip could not allow this key part of his inheritance to be at risk. To do so would be to betray his very heritage.


The following excerpt is taken from a biography of Philip II published in 1992. This historian places the responsibility on Philip for causing the Revolt in the Netherlands.

On leaving the Netherlands in 1559, Philip was aware of its unstable condition and he promised to treat it favorably and return as soon as possible. That he never came back and proceeded to implement unpopular policies goes a long way to explaining why, within ten
years, he was facing the most serious rebellion of his reign. He knew all too well that the
Netherlanders had experienced the immense financial hardship in the 1550s and were in
urgent need of peace. The end of the Habsburg-Valois hostilities in 1559, and the growing
attacks by the Turks in North Africa, shifted Philip’s priorities to the Mediterranean; for
the next twenty years, no matter what happened in the Netherlands, he would always keep
one eye firmly focused on the Turks. If this emphasis was quite intelligible to Spaniards,
the Netherlanders saw it was a neglect of duty, and historians have subsequently argued
that it was a serious political miscalculation. Certainly the Dutch determination to resist
Spanish rule and to preserve their religious and civil liberties, allied to their skillful
deployment of naval and land tactics, frustrated successive Spanish generals. Yet the
responsibility for causing the revolt and for failing to suppress it lay with the king.

http://www.teachithistory.co.uk/?CurrMenu=1319&resource=23584.


The following document is from a common textbook covering World History from 200,000
years ago to the present. This particular excerpt is from the Chapter Europe Transformed:
Reform and State Building under the heading and subheading: Europe in Crisis, 1560-
1650, Politics and Wars of Religion in the Sixteenth Century. The textbook assigned the
following question to the aforementioned section: “Why is the period between 1560 and
1650 in Europe called an age of crisis...?”

The greatest advocate of militant Catholicism in the second half of the sixteenth century
was King Philip II of Spain (1556-1598), the son and heir of Charles V. Philip’s reign
ushered in an age of Spanish greatness, both politically and culturally. Philip II had
inherited from his father Spain, the Netherlands, and possessions in Italy and the New
World. To strengthen his control, Philip insisted on strict conformity to Catholicism and
strong, monarchical authority. Achieving the latter was not an easy task, because each of
the lands of his empire had its own structure of government. The Catholic faith was
crucial to the Spanish people chosen by God to save Catholic Christianity from the
Protestant heretics. Philip II, the “most Catholic king,” became the champion of
Catholicism throughout Europe. Spain’s leadership of the “holy league” against Turkish
encroachments in the Mediterranean resulted in a stunning victory over the Turkish fleet in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. But Philip’s problems with the Netherlands and the English Queen Elizabeth led to his greatest misfortunes.

Philip’s attempt to strengthen his control in the Spanish Netherlands, which consisted of
seventeen provinces modern Netherlands and Belgium), soon led to a revolt. The nobles,
who stood to lose the most politically, strongly opposed Philip’s efforts. Religion also
became a major catalyst for rebellion when Philip attempted to crush Calvinism. Violence
erupted in 1566, and the revolt became organized, especially in the northern provinces, where the Dutch, under the leadership of William of Nassau, the prince of Orange, offered growing resistance. The struggle dragged on for decades until 1609, when a twelve-year truce ended the war, virtually recognizing the independence of the northern provinces. These seven northern provinces, which called themselves the United Provinces of the Netherlands, became the core of the modern Dutch state.


The following document is from a common textbook covering the history of Western Civilizations from 200,000 years ago to the present, though the meat of the textbook really begins with Ancient Greece. Western Civilization was commonly taught as a standard history course before more schools moved to a more comprehensive World History course in the 1970s and 1980s. This particular excerpt is from the Chapter “Alone Before God”: Religious Reform and Warfare, 1500-1648, under the heading and subheading: Europe Erupts Again: A century of Religious Warfare, 1559-1648, A “Council of Blood” in the Netherlands, 1566-1609.

In addition to Spain, the Catholic king Philip II ruled over the Netherlands, which consisted of seventeen provinces. (Today, these provinces are Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg.) Trouble began when Philip began to exert more control over the provinces – he restructured the Catholic Church to weaken the local aristocracy, he insisted on billeting troops locally, and he levied new taxes, all of which offended the Dutch.

In response, riots broke out in 1566 and Dutch protestants, though still a tiny minority, rebelled against their Spanish, Catholic overlords. In a spasm of violence, they destroyed Catholic Church property, smashing images of saints and desecrating the host. Philip was enraged. Vowing to silence the rebels, he sent the largest land army ever assembled into the Netherlands to crush the Protestants and bring the province back under Catholic rule. In 1572, organized revolt broke out and war officially began.

Philip’s crackdown ignited a savage forty-year contest in which the Spanish general, the “iron duke of Alba” presided over a slaughter of thousands of Protestants in what he called a “Council of Troubles,” but what the Protestants called the “Council of Blood.” Calvinist preachers retaliated by giving their congregations complete license to kill the invaders. To protect themselves, the towns of the Netherlands even opened their dikes to flood their country rather than give in to Philip’s armies. The Dutch found an able leader in William of Orange, a nobleman known for his wise counsel, who took charge in 1580. William was assassinated four years later, and the murderer was publicly tortured to death as blood continued to flow in the Netherlands.

The defiance of the Dutch cost Philip more than the loss of soldiers and huge amounts of gold to finance the wars. It also diverted his attention northwards, away from his victory
over the Turks at Lepanto in 1571. Preoccupied by events in the Netherlands, he failed to ride the wave of widespread Christian antipathy toward the Turks and launch a decisive campaign against the enemy in the eastern Mediterranean. …

Philip never succeeded in subduing the Protestants in the Netherlands; the conflict dragged on until the deaths of both Philip and Elizabeth. In 1609, the two sides finally drew up an agreement that gave the northern provinces virtual independence. The final recognition of an independent Netherlands would have to wait until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.


*The following document is from a common textbook covering the history of Western Civilizations from 1300 years ago to the present. Western Civilization was commonly taught as a standard history course before more schools moved to a more comprehensive World History course in the 1970s and 1980s. As the title suggests, the focus of this book is on social history. This particular excerpt is from the Chapter *Reformations and Religious Wars* under the heading and subheading: Religious Violence; The Netherlands Under Charles V.*

In the Netherlands, what began as a movement for the reformation of the church developed into a struggle for Dutch independence. Emperor Charles V had inherited the seventeen provinces that compose present-day Belgium and the Netherlands. Each was self-governing and enjoyed the right to make its own laws and collect its own taxes. The provinces were united politically only in recognition of a common ruler, the emperor. The cities of the Netherlands made their living by trade and industry.

In the Low Countries as elsewhere, corruption in the Roman Church and the critical spirit of the Renaissance provoked pressure for reform, and Lutheran ideas took root. Charles V had grown up in the Netherlands, however, and he was able to limit their impact. But Charles V abdicated in 1556 and transferred power over the Netherlands to his son Philip II, who had grown up in Spain. Protestant ideas spread.

By the 1560s Protestants in the Netherlands were primarily Calvinists. Calvinism’s intellectual seriousness, moral gravity, and emphasis on any form of labor well done appealed to urban merchants, financiers, and artisans. Whereas Lutherans taught respect for the powers that be, Calvinism tended to encourage opposition to political authorities who were judged to be ungodly.

When Spanish authorities attempted to suppress Calvinist worship and raised taxes in the 1560s, rioting ensued. Calvinists sacked thirty Catholic churches in Antwerp, destroying the religious images in them in a wave of iconoclasm. From Antwerp the destruction spread. Philip II sent twenty thousand Spanish troops under the Duke of Alva to pacify the
Low Countries. Alba interpreted “pacification” to mean ruthless extermination of religious and political dissidents. On top of the Inquisition, he opened his own tribunal, soon called the “Council of Blood.” On March 3, 1568, fifteen hundred men were executed. To Calvinists, all this was clear indication that Spanish rule was ungodly and should be overthrown.

Between 1568 and 1578 civil war raged in the Netherlands between Catholics and Protestants and between the seventeen provinces and Spain. Eventually the ten southern provinces, the Spanish Netherlands (the future Belgium), came under the control of the Spanish Habsburg forces. The seven northern provinces, led by Holland, formed the Union of Utrecht and in 1581 declared their independence from Spain. The north was Protestant; the south remained Catholic. Philip did not accept this, and war continued. England was even drawn into the conflict, supplying money and troops to the northern United Provinces. (Spain launched an unsuccessful invasion of England in response; see page 410.) Hostilities ended in 1609 when Spain agreed to a truce recognized the independence of the United Provinces.


The following document is from a common AP textbook covering the European History from the year 1300 to the present. This particular excerpt is from the Chapter The Rise of the Atlantic Economy: Spain and England the heading and subheading: The Decline of Spain: The Dutch Revolt.

The decline of Spanish power began with the Dutch revolt. In the Netherlands, Dutch nobles and officials resisted higher taxes imposed by the Spanish crown. Above all, many Dutch were angered by the Spanish king’s attempt to promote the Catholic Reformation by imposing the Inquisition in a land where most people were now Calvinists. In the early 1560s, resistance first began against the presence of Spanish garrisons.

In 1567, Phillip II appointed the duke of Alba (1507-1582) to restore order in the north with 10,000 Spanish troops. The ruthless Castillian ordered the execution of prominent Calvinist nobles on the central square of Brussels, established military courts, imposed heavy new taxes, and virtually destroyed self-government in the Netherlands. But Alba’s reign of terror as governor also helped transform the resistance of Dutch nobles and officials, led by William of Orange (1553-1584), into a national revolt.