

The Revolt of the Netherlands

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Reading suggestions

1. The Arrival of Philip

In 1548 Charles did two things which were to have a major impact on the future of the Netherlands.

1. He constituted all seventeen provinces into the Burgundian Circle of the Empire, which he then exempted from Imperial law.

This meant that their membership of the Empire became purely theoretical, and since he held all the titles of sovereignty himself the notion of fealty became equally unreal.

2. In 1549 he persuaded the Estates of each province to accept a 'Pragmatic Sanction' which settled the succession on his son Philip, turning the whole region into a quasi-state, which would henceforth travel with the crown of Spain.

In principle Philip would rule as Duke of Burgundy, and by an assortment of other titles, but in practice as King of Spain.

Philip was very much a Spaniard.

He had been brought up and educated in that country, and was only really at home in its language.

As a well-trained young aristocrat he both read and spoke competent Latin, but his French was defective, and of other languages he seems to have been entirely innocent.

Consequently when Charles brought him north to meet his future subjects in 1549, the experiment was not a success.

At twenty two Philip was not particularly young for such an ordeal, and he was accompanied by a Spanish entourage and interpreters, but confronted by men whose language and culture were equally alien to him, he appeared distant and withdrawn.

This could easily be (and was) interpreted as arrogance, but in fact was probably simple bewilderment.

Philip - for whatever reason - did not make a good impression.

Nevertheless the attempt was a strenuous one.

Coming from Italy, he started at Luxembourg on the 23rd March, and proceeded by way of Namur to Brussels, where he arrived in the 1st April.

Philip stayed in Brussels for over three months, endeavouring to learn whatever his father could teach him about the government of the provinces, and meeting most of the French speaking nobles of the south.

On the 12th July he left Brussels and went by way of Ghent to Bruges, where he arrived on the 28th. He then took a wide sweep through Artois and Hainault, reaching Arras on the 12th August, and Binche on the 31st.

Returning to Brussels by way of Mons, he did not stop for more than a day or two before proceeding to Antwerp, which he reached on the 19th September.

His tour of the northern provinces, which were probably deemed less important and in any case were Dutch speaking, was rather less leisurely.

Going by way of Breda and Bergen, he reached s'Hertogenbosch on the 24th September, and then toured rapidly through Holland, Utrecht and Gelderland.

He visited Dordrecht, Rotterdam and the Hague, reaching Utrecht on the 5th October, before going on to Kempen, Zwolle and Zutphen.

He ended his tour at Roermond on the 22^d October, and then headed back to Antwerp.

Considering the amount of time and effort which had been invested in it, the visit was a public relations disaster, and Charles must have known that perfectly well.

However, he was proud of his son as well as fond of him, and in any case had no intention of changing his plans, so he swallowed the lesson, and held on for another six years in the hope that Philip might by then have learned a certain diplomatic graciousness.

In the course of his tour, which lasted into the spring of 1550, he had been sworn in as heir apparent in every province, a gesture intended to emphasise the solidarity of the Netherlands under Habsburg rule.

Unfortunately the impression of unity and harmony was misleading, and to that Philip's own behaviour made a significant contribution.

In 1550 Philip returned to Spain, but discontent in the Netherlands continued to grow.

This was largely for financial reasons, because Charles's war taxation had squeezed the towns hard, provoking outright rebellion in Bruges and Ghent in the 1530s.

These wars continued, breaking out afresh in 1552, and resentment in places like Antwerp was very keen.

The privileges of the provinces were also often mutually exclusive, and generations of hostility were thinly concealed by the 'harmony' of 1549.

Thirteen of the seventeen Provinces were represented in the Estates General. But that was a largely ineffective body, and contributed hardly at all to the unity which Charles was struggling to build.

In 1554 Philip came north again, this time to England where he married Queen Mary in July.

Charles had negotiated this match with more than half an eye on the Netherlands, because he was well aware of the danger to Philip's inheritance, not only from the French but also from his brother Ferdinand.

A power base nearby in England was exactly what he needed to consolidate his position.

Consequently after he had been a year in England, the Emperor summoned his son to receive authority in the Low Countries, and abdicated in his favour in September 1555.

Within year Philip was embroiled in a constitutional dispute with the City of Brussels, and attempted unsuccessfully to get its charter revoked.

Philip's sense of royal dignity did not at all correspond with what the citizens were prepared to offer, and in that they spoke for the Estates of many provinces.

In July 1557 the Estates General forced him to concede administrative control over the taxation which they reluctantly voted, and that humiliation affected him deeply.

By then he had put a stop on his debts, and was effectively bankrupt.

This situation forced him to make peace with France, which was concluded in April 1559 at Cateau Cambresis, and in July he returned to Spain, his wife Mary of England, having died in November 1558.

When he withdrew, Philip left in the Netherlands a Regent in the person of his half sister Margaret, Duchess of Parma, and a council of ostensibly traditional composition.

Unfortunately the appearance was deceptive, because he also left secret instructions that Margaret was only to act on the advice of Cardinal Granvelle, a hispanicised prelate in whom he reposed particular trust.

He also left a number of Spanish advisers who made Margaret's position particularly difficult.

The falseness of the situation became increasingly apparent, and in March 1563 three of the major noblemen, the Prince of Orange and Counts Egmont and Horne, formed a league and despatched an ultimatum to the king demanding Granvelle's removal.

Philip refused and the three protestors resigned from the Council of State.

Faced with the potential paralysis of her government, in the midst of a trade war with England and with the Baltic closed to Netherlands shipping, Margaret responded to the crisis in the only way possible.

Margaret petitioned the King personally for Granvelle's removal on the bizarre, but effective, grounds that his presence was harming the fight against heresy. Nothing else could have touched Philip so nearly, and he gave his consent to the cardinal's removal. He left Brussels on the 13th March 1564.

When the Count of Egmont had visited Valladolid on behalf of the Council of State, he thought he had detected some flexibility in the king's stance on heresy.