



Revolt in the Netherlands: The Eighty Years War, 1568–1648 by Anton van der Lem.

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Anton van der Lem, curator of rare books at Leiden University and author of several works on the history of the Low Countries, is well qualified to write a one-volume study of the Eighty Years War. This is fortunate, since “most historians who work on the Revolt are reluctant to offer a summary for a wider, nonprofessional readership because they are so aware of its complexity. And yet someone must dare to take the step. This book is aimed at those readers” (8). The result is *Revolt in the Netherlands*, an even-handed overview of the longest conflict of the Wars of Religion.

The book’s chronological structure allows van der Lem to clarify its progress for his target audience, while strengthening his arguments, which cut a Gordian knot of national and historiographical myths. He begins by explaining what caused the war: he argues that neither Dutch independence nor Protestantism drove the subjects of the Netherlands to protest and then openly rebel against their Spanish sovereign. Instead, he frames the war’s origins in distinctly modern terms: “They were grounded in three fundamental rights that apply at all times and in all countries but which, unfortunately, are still often not guaranteed in modern times: the freedom of religion and conscience, the right to self-determination and the right of participation” (11). On this foundation, the author explains that many Netherlanders were pushed into more extreme forms of resistance by (a) the Spanish royal government’s persecution of Protestants, (b) neglect of local traditions of governance, and (c) exclusion of the local governing class.

Van der Lem destroys the idea that there were nascent Belgian and Dutch nations before the war. Rather, he asserts, the war itself forged these two national identities from an arbitrary collection of lands inherited by the Dukes of Burgundy and expanded by the wars of Charles V. The latter was the first ruler to give the region any kind of political unity: he “essentially created for himself a new state, where his son Philip would succeed him as ruler. Only the crown was lacking” (31).

Van der Lem disputes the notion that the war was waged between an exclusively Protestant north and an exclusively Catholic south. Instead, the revolt was geographically dispersed in its early stages and the largest centers of Protestant agitation were in the Francophone lands of the south. Since these were the first to rebel, they bore the brunt of Spanish-loyalist suppression and counter-reformation measures. A mostly Protestant north began to exist only when the rebels captured several coastal towns and used them as bases whence to conquer much of the present-day Kingdom of the Netherlands. Areas controlled by what became the Dutch Republic contained significant numbers of Roman Catholics. Both the north and south contained migrants from the other side. Many of the leaders in the Dutch Republic were Protestants from the south. By the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the borders of the Dutch Republic in the north and the loyalist Netherlands in the south were determined by the location of armies. Van der Lem even claims that military conquest determined the borders of the modern nation-states.

National myth-making spawned a pantheon of heroes and Van der Lem tries to treat all sides fairly. Throughout, he lets their actions speak for themselves as long as he can before passing

judgement. That said, certain individuals emerge as clear heroes. William the Silent figures as the chief protagonist in the early years of the conflict, always striving to keep the moral high ground. In this book, he appears deserving of his mythic status. His prudent leadership held together a coalition of chiefly Calvinist discontents. His peers, the Counts of Egmont and Horn, are cast as loyal martyrs who unwittingly ran afoul of their sovereign, Philip II. William's successor, Maurice of Nassau, reaches nearly the same status as William the Silent, but van der Lem criticizes his complicity in the execution of Johan Oldenbarnevelt. On the Spanish/Loyalist side of the conflict, the Archduke Albert and his wife Isabella appear as conscientious governors-general, wishing to govern their domains justly but handcuffed by the policies of Madrid.

The author excoriates the government in Madrid, particularly Philip II, who, with his chief agent, the Duke of Alba, appears as the true villain of the story. Philip's rigid policies and Alba's high-handed actions helped drive the ostensibly loyal Netherlanders into open revolt. One gets the sense there was nothing prudent about the Prudent King's approach to the Netherlands:

Neither the king nor his governors-general seemed to have learned much from the political situation or the criticism from all quarters: the people of the Netherlands had been making the same demand for ten years, but the crown never seriously considered any response other than military action. Their *modus operandi* was always the same: concede when there was no other choice and seize power when the opportunity presented itself. (115)

Van der Lem lays blame for the conflict squarely at Philip II's feet. He does, however, grant that the sixteenth century's attitude toward competing claims to universal truth left neither side eager to compromise. Nevertheless, Philip II and his successors were interested in saving face and maintaining *reputación*. This drove the Madrid government to hold a hard line long after military and financial exigencies required a change of policies. "The Spanish king [Philip III] was given three months to ratify the truce, and although he put it off until the last minute (7 July), he had no choice but to do so, because of financial problems. He was convinced that he would have the Republic back under his own control after the twelve years had passed" (166). Furthermore, this desire to save face came at the expense of the loyal subjects of the southern Netherlands, who endured most of the damage caused by the fighting. The tradition continued with Philip IV and his chief minister, the Count-Duke of Olivares, even in peace negotiations. "Olivares gave [Pieter] Roose permission to play the parties in the royalist Netherlands against each other. He even suggested he conclude a treaty with the Republic behind the governor-general's back. This is yet another example of Spanish disloyalty to its own people" (192).

In writing so small a book on such a large subject, van der Lem has had to choose judiciously which aspects of the war to include. Geographically, the book concerns its main theater—the Low Countries. There are succinct discussions of how things were seen from Madrid, in order to explain Spanish policies in the Netherlands. The author spends far less time on the domestic and foreign policies of France, England, and the Holy Roman Empire, except when they bear directly on the Eighty Years War.

Van der Lem's attention to political issues will benefit nonspecialist readers. He provides brief overviews of the campaigns, mostly focusing on their results, but in (barely) enough detail to give readers some impression of the nature and course of the war. Readers seeking fuller analyses of the campaigns will have to look elsewhere.¹

1. E.g., Olaf van Nimwegen, *The Dutch Army and the Military Revolutions, 1588–1688* (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 2010).

In fact, the only conceptual weakness of the book lies in its author's poor grasp of the nature of the war. The Revolt comprised two distinct phases of fighting and van der Lem is unsure of what to call them. He notes that stage two resembles a "normal" interstate war with clear borders and professional military establishments. Well and good, but he misunderstands the nature of low-intensity warfare and insurgencies.

The early Revolt, a revolutionary insurgency marked by pervasive unrest among the general population, was channeled by a radical Calvinist minority in the Netherlands intent on overthrowing the existing Roman Catholic social order. They were politically organized and set up committees of eighteen in cities they captured. Calvinist hedge preachers² readied the ground for future revolutionary activity. Ultimately, the failure of Spanish counterinsurgency methods to win "hearts and minds" allowed the rebels to form a new state.

Overall, Anton van der Lem has written a clear and accessible³ overview of the Eighty Years War for general readers or undergraduates, one that will serve as a good launching point into the specialized literature on the subject. Specifically, readers will understand why the war was fought, why Spain lost its northern provinces, and how economic, military, and political mistakes affected the Spanish war effort.

2. Itinerant Protestant preachers, who gave sermons in the countryside in order to avoid suppression by pro-Spanish Catholic officials in the cities.

3. Kudos to the translator, Andy Brown.