

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

IN THE SPRING OF 1575 the Northern Quarter of Holland, the region north of the River IJ, was a fortress under siege. The Beggar rebels who held it were cut off from their fellow insurgents in South Holland and Zeeland. The government army had dug itself into a heavily fortified but not easily defensible bridgehead, which extended from Naarden and Muiden in the east through Amsterdam to Haarlem, thus driving a wedge between the two areas in rebel hands. For the central government in Brussels it was vitally important to reconquer North Holland from the rebels, and so break through the virtual encirclement of Amsterdam, which had remained loyal to Church and King. The Amsterdammers were suffering great hardship, above all because the rebels in North Holland had cut their trade and shipping routes. On 26 April Wouter Jacobszoon, a monk who had taken refuge in Amsterdam, noted in his diary a rumor that the Spanish army was getting ready for a new campaign. “A gruesome apparatus of war” was being prepared to “attack or overpower” the rebels by force.¹

Not long before, Brother Wouter had been leading a peaceful and orderly life as prior of the Augustinian monastery at Stein near Gouda. But when his fellow townsmen opened their gates to a Beggar band in June 1572, he and many others had fled. Although he found a temporary refuge in Amsterdam he did not feel safe there. The city was swarming with asylum seekers, who posed serious problems for the magistrates. As long as the rebels kept up their blockade, it was hard enough for the beleaguered city to feed its own population. Moreover, even in Catholic Amsterdam the inhabitants were anything but kindly disposed toward monks and other clerical refugees.

While the ex-prior waited for better times—which would never come—he recorded his daily observations in his journal. We do not know exactly what he had in mind in keeping such a record, but it was certainly not a mere private diary. Probably Wouter Jacobszoon wanted to bear witness to his readers—perhaps his fellow monks now scattered in exile?—of the extraordinary times in which he found himself, when in a way not seen in living memory the Lord showed how he would punish sinners and put

¹ DWJ, 492.

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his faithful to the test. “Mark well reader,” he wrote in February 1573, “everything that is written here, and marvel at this troubled, tormented and wild, desolate time in which we have lived.”²

It is to Wouter Jacobszoon’s eagerness to keep a record that we owe one of the most fascinating works of the age of the Revolt. His recurrent accounts of hunger and misery, petty humiliations and savage massacres, his hopes of a speedy end to the war, and his fears that it would only grow worse, remind us that the Dutch Revolt was a true revolt for only a very few. For the great majority of the people of the Netherlands the Revolt was not a course they had chosen but a calamity that overwhelmed them. The catastrophe displayed the familiar features of a war. Yet it was not the heroic struggle for national liberation that nineteenth-century historians wanted to see in it, but an ordinary “dirty” war. For most contemporaries the most urgent question was not how to win it, but how to survive it. Many joined Wouter Jacobszoon on the road to exile, contributing to an enormous refugee problem.

As always, the poor, and above all the rural poor, were the first and hardest hit of the war’s victims, as every page of Brother Wouter’s journal testifies. But what makes it such a special document is its wealth of vivid detail, which evokes a concrete and sometimes almost apocalyptic picture of a society torn apart by war. In November 1572, for example, Wouter reported that many poor folk from Amsterdam had gone to the Diemermeer to take the carcasses of dead cattle floating on the water. The animals, at least a hundred of them, had been stolen from the farms by the Beggars and driven over the ice, but had fallen through it and drowned. The poor people were willing to eat the meat of the carcasses. This, as Brother Wouter pointed out, “well showed . . . what suffering of hunger and misery has befallen this age.”

In January 1575 Wouter heard from a soldier who had found a woman with a child at her breast sitting by the dike near Ter Hart, a country house between Amsterdam and Haarlem. When he took a closer look he saw that she was dead and frozen stiff, but must have had some milk left in her breast, at which the child was suckling. The baby was brought to the Spanish camp, as a “sign to be wondered at.”

Children were the first and most defenseless victims of the war. A woman carrying a seven- or eight-week-old infant on her shoulder was shot by the Beggars “so that its intestines burst out of its body and it died.” In November 1573 some children whose father had died were brought from Beverwijk to the Lily convent in Haarlem. Some of them were so malnourished they would have been taken for dead if they had

² *Ibid.*, 179; on Wouter Jacobszoon, *ibid.*, i–xvi. The passages cited below are from *DWJ*, 179, 76, 121, 81, 337, 343, 280, 494, 492, 499–502.

not stirred from time to time. Two of them died within two weeks and were buried together in a single coffin, a used one that the gravedigger dug up and emptied for a small fee. In the same month Wouter Jacobszoon heard that people were lying dead on the dike between Haarlem and Amsterdam, with no one to remove or bury them. Birds and dogs had gnawed at their bodies.

Soon after Haarlem fell to the Spanish army, Wouter took the opportunity to visit his old friend and colleague, the prior of the monastic house at Zijl in Haarlem. On 23 July 1573 he walked along the dike beside the River IJ to Haarlem. After months of siege the countryside presented a forlorn and eerie sight:

And as I journeyed there, I saw on the way the frightful desolation to which the land has come through the troubles in this present year. I found very few houses between Haarlem and Amsterdam that had not been burned. All the churches along this road that we saw were either burned down or at least miraculously damaged and broken. In many places the land was altogether waste without any cattle.

I also saw on the way, among many animals that lay here and there, a naked body lying in the middle of the road in the cart tracks, and it was dried out by the sun, and almost crushed, so that a decent person must shudder to look at it. And it was especially amazing that no one was found who saw fit to remove the body from the road, or cover it with earth, but it remained lying there like the carcass of a beast.

Yet even in the darkest years of the war there were glimmerings of hope. For a short time in the spring of 1575 it was not the miseries of war that kept Wouter's pen busy but the hope of peace. Negotiations were under way in Breda between representatives of the Spanish governor of the Netherlands, Luis de Requesens, and the rebel leader William of Orange in the hope of ending the war, which had now lasted three years and which seemed to be unwinnable by either side. Brother Wouter eagerly followed the reports of the peace conference. On 6 May he wrote that the man in the street in Amsterdam was convinced that peace was already a fact.

Wouter's optimism was short-lived. The very same day he spoke to a traveler from Brabant, who told him that no one any longer believed in peace. Discouraging reports had been circulating as early as 28 April, and Wouter wrote that many now doubted that peace would be made because so many soldiers were afoot, and there was an impression that this time the Spaniards would strike at the Northland. It was also rumored that Hierges, the king's Stadholder of Holland, had come to Utrecht to be briefed on communications with the Northern Quarter. For Wouter this was a clear sign that some dreadful event was imminent.

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On 22 May, Wouter had more certain news about the resumption of hostilities: the smiths in Amsterdam had been ordered to work day and night making shovels, spades, and other digging tools for the war effort. Next day the Stadholder Hierges himself arrived in Amsterdam. Wouter realized the campaign would be “for the Northland, for the same to be destroyed by fire and sword.” A day later he watched a large fleet of transport and escort ships sail out of the harbor of Amsterdam to Muiden, to pick up the infantry assembled there. On the 25th Spanish cavalry passed the city on the way to Beverwijk, where the expedition to invade North Holland was gathering. On the same day it was proclaimed to the sound of trumpets in Amsterdam that the citizens had leave to go to the camp as sutlers (victuallers). More troops passed through the city the next day, and there was now a rumor that Alkmaar would be besieged and that the rebels in the North had cut the dikes again.

On 27 May, Brother Wouter learned that the army had left its camp at Beverwijk and was marching north. The rumor mill was now working overtime: the Prince of Orange was said to have advised Alkmaar to surrender to the king and admit the royal army. But the very next day refugees from Alkmaar arrived, who claimed that the truth was exactly the opposite. “The Northlanders,” they insisted, “were ready to wade up to their knees in their own blood rather than return to the Catholic faith and their obedience to the King.” Others claimed to know for a fact that South Holland was willing to yield, but that the north of the province would stand firm. Letters from Utrecht and Gouda reported that peace was now beyond doubt, especially with the towns of South Holland. But only two days later the prospect of peace seemed to have vanished once more.

On 29 May, Wouter heard that the army had returned to Beverwijk. The invasion plan had come to nothing. The troops had been in great danger and had barely escaped with their lives. If Requesens really wanted to subdue the North, people felt, he would first have to send reinforcements.

About a week later all hope of the recapture of the North was gone. On 7 June the army left its camp in Beverwijk and began to lay siege to the small town of Buren in the Betuwe. No one understood the implications of this; some were still hoping for peace, while others dreaded even worse to come. “One saw the people walking about wholly defenseless and desperate, like men who had no hope at all but dreaded further sorrow and misery.”

Why had Hierges abandoned his campaign in North Holland so suddenly? The wildest rumors were in the air. Many suspected that the expedition had been no more than a diversionary maneuver, intended to lure William of Orange’s army out of South Holland. But others hinted at treachery.

As early as 31 May it was being said in Amsterdam that certain Beggar captains had been willing to betray the city of Alkmaar and some of the forts to Hierges. The scheme had been discovered and the traitors put to death, “so it was said,” Wouter added cautiously. On 4 June he had more certain information. The plotters—seven cartloads of Beggar soldiers—were supposed to have been brought captive into Alkmaar, “for they were accused as traitors, as having an alliance with the Spaniards, cunningly to deliver up to them the forts that stood in the way of their coming into the Northland.” The plan had been exposed, and the traitors had been arrested and executed. The Spanish army had no choice but to withdraw without achieving its objective.

This book is about Hierges’s failed invasion of the Northern Quarter, the frustrated plot, and the chain of dramatic events that it set in motion. On the first rumors of treason Diederik Sonoy, the Prince of Orange’s governor in the Northern Quarter, had ordered the arrest of all suspect strangers. About twenty vagrants were seized, tortured, and executed after a summary trial. The vagrants named as the men who had incited them some North Holland peasants, who in turn were arrested and interrogated. One of them died under torture, two others obdurately continued to deny the charge in spite of exceptionally long and cruel tortures. Finally their resistance was broken, and they accused several Catholic townsmen, among them Jan Jeroenszoon, an advocate from Hoorn. The hysterical campaign against the alleged traitors began to assume the dimensions of a witch hunt, which threatened to engulf the burgomasters of Hoorn as well. The town sprang to the defense of its accused citizens, William of Orange concerned himself with the question, and the investigation became bogged down in a succession of laborious proceedings. The Pacification of Ghent—the peace treaty of 1576 between rebel-held Holland and Zeeland and the other provinces of the Netherlands—ought to have put an end to the affair, but the prisoners demanded a fair trial in which they could prove their innocence. After the Court of Holland acquitted them, they in turn brought actions against Sonoy and the commissioners who had investigated the plot.

The treason affair in the Northern Quarter and all its repercussions remained a cause célèbre in the historiography of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. For Protestant historians who took the official pro-States view it was a well-known black page in their otherwise glorious national history. Catholic authors, in contrast, saw it as yet another proof of the scandalous outrages perpetrated by the Beggars on the Catholic majority of the population. In the twentieth century the treason of the Northern Quarter has been all but forgotten.

Why then devote a whole book to this old story? I had three aims in view in writing this book. My first is the simplest: the betrayal of the

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Northern Quarter is a story that is still worth telling again to a new generation of readers. The way in which Nanning Coppenszoon and Pieter Nanningszoon withstood long and inhuman torture, to avoid accusing innocent people, still arouses our astonished admiration. We can still sympathize with the ingenuity and tenacity of Jan Jeroenszoon, while his unshaken confidence in the law as the protector of the powerless against unbridled authority has lost none of its relevance. The cynicism of the commissioners who carried out the investigation, and who were more concerned to close their file than to respect the individual rights of the accused, is another aspect that is still as timely as ever. In short the history of the betrayal of the Northern Quarter is a story with many of the qualities of an epic, a gripping tale with every appearance of authentic villains and untarnished heroes. It is also a case that raises a number of currently topical questions in the most striking and concrete form: questions that concern the nature of the Revolt and its significance, the role of law in society, civil rights, and the limits imposed on them in time of war and time of peace.

The first historian to relate the plot in detail was Pieter Christiaenszoon Bor in the third impression of his monumental work on the “Origin, Beginning, and Continuation of the Wars of the Netherlands” of 1621.³ Bor combed the archives so thoroughly that not a single historian since his time has bothered to investigate them anew. My second aim has therefore been to reconstruct the events from the original documents, both the sources that underlay Bor’s work and others. Only where they have been lost does Bor remain an indispensable and not necessarily unreliable guide. Still, new archive research has revealed some new details.

Finally, in this account I have tried to reconstruct the historical context as broadly as possible. The background to the events, which was still self-evident for readers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can no longer be taken for granted. That background posed no problem for historians such as Bor, Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft, and Jan Wagenaar, whose readers in the Dutch Republic lived in an age when the Revolt in many respects was still a past imperfect. Much of the context in which the events had to be understood was still as alive in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as it had been in the Revolt. Such questions as the autonomy of the towns from the central government, the importance of urban privileges and the different social positions of townsmen, country folk, and foreigners were still vitally relevant and familiar to everyone. The Revolt had begun precisely to protect these and other privileges against the centralizing policy of the government. Because the Revolt achieved these

³ Bor, book VIII. On the historiography of the treason of the Northern Quarter, see also chapter 12 of this book.

goals in the seven northern provinces of the Netherlands, the same constitution and the same institutions survived there until the time of the French Revolution. Anyone who brought a case before the Court of Holland at the end of the eighteenth century followed exactly the same procedure as Jan Jeroenszoon and his fellow prisoners two centuries earlier.

That situation changed in the nineteenth century. The coming into being of a unitary state (the Kingdom of the Netherlands), the principle of the equality of all citizens before the law, the introduction of the Napoleonic Codes, and the separation of Church and State all drew a line under the republican past and made the sixteenth century appear suddenly much more remote. Yet nineteenth-century historians were scarcely aware of this greater gulf, and carried on as if the historical context that had still been self-evident in the time of the Republic were as obvious as ever.

This lack of historical distance was partly explained by the role that historical writing played in the nineteenth century in legitimizing the national state. That state was undeniably the heir of the old Republic, which in its turn had been founded in the Revolt; and because the Dutch national state was regarded as a good thing, the Revolt must therefore have been a good thing as well. From this teleological and determinist perspective nineteenth-century liberal historians saw the Revolt as a struggle for national liberation, the overthrow of a foreign oppressor who had failed to respect the peculiarities of the (North) Netherlands nation. In this way the writers of nineteenth-century nationalist history reclaimed a past that was now definitively over, and remodeled it to suit their own needs.⁴

Much the same can be said of nineteenth-century Catholic historians. Once Catholics had won political equality in the constitution of 1798, confirmed by the liberal constitution of 1848, they sought to achieve complete social emancipation. The writing of history was one of their chief means to this end. Naturally, Catholic historians traced a direct line of descent from the humiliations inflicted on the victims of the Beggars to the social inferiority that they themselves chafed under. The sixteenth-century martyrs could only serve as inspiring examples if they were presented as fellow-sufferers who had fought the same cosmic battle as their nineteenth-century descendants. These historians did not always see quite so clearly that there had been great changes between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries.⁵

Around the middle of the twentieth century the Revolt of the Netherlands moved definitively from past imperfect to past perfect. Those who want to invoke history to support “national” values or national unity

⁴ Blaas, “Nederlandse geschiedschrijving”; on the historiography of the Revolt see Smit, “The present position”; Woltjer, “Beeld vergeuisd”; Groenveld, “Beeldvorming en realiteit.”

⁵ Vermaeren, *Katholieke Nederlandse geschiedschrijving*.

appeal instead to a more recent past, the Second World War. Of course the unity of the Dutch people in the Second World War is, up to a point, no less a myth than their unity in the struggle against “Spain,” but the new myth lends itself more easily to such manipulation than the old. After all, the Revolt of the sixteenth century was not just a struggle for freedom, but also for religion. Although contemporaries were very well able to distinguish between them, the two issues were nevertheless linked in a complex symbiosis. The Reformed Church claimed a privileged place in the state and society that emerged from the Revolt, while Catholics had to accept relegation to the rank of second-class citizens. In the conditions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe such a result was probably inevitable, but it certainly prevented the Revolt from serving as a symbol of national unity in the independent state to which it gave birth.

The Revolt was a civil war of Catholics against Protestants, loyalists against rebels (to say nothing of the large middle groups who were unwilling to choose either party and who were dragged along against their will by events).⁶ The efforts of such nineteenth-century national liberal historians as Robert Fruin and Petrus Johannes Blok to force the Revolt into the mold of a general struggle for national liberation were so at odds with the facts that they were ultimately doomed to failure.

There are several reasons to retell an old tale from the original sources and place it in the widest possible historical context. In the first place attention is paid to the period that was once known, with magnificent partiality, as the “heroic phase of the Revolt.” Until the middle of the twentieth century the history of the Revolt of 1572 and the subsequent four years of war in Holland and Zeeland took center stage in Dutch historiography (the spotlights being focused on the heroic defense of Haarlem, Alkmaar, and Leiden), but in recent decades historians have shown relatively little interest in these events.⁷

Also new is the geographical focus of this study, the Northern Quarter of Holland. Except for the siege of Alkmaar the history of the war of 1572–76 has been written almost entirely as the affair of South Holland and Zeeland.⁸ No one at the time could have suspected that, as the Dutch

⁶ The first author who explicitly described the Revolt as a civil war was Van Gelder, “Historiese vergelijking.” On the importance of the middle groups see Woltjer, *Tussen vrijheidsstrijd en burgeroorlog*.

⁷ Important revisionist contributions were made by Woltjer, *Tussen vrijheidsstrijd en burgeroorlog*; Hibben, *Gouda in Revolt*; Janssens, *Brabant in het verweer*; Swart, *William of Orange*, chapter 1. As perspective shifted from a national liberation struggle to a revolt, interest grew in the motives of that revolt. In what circumstances were subjects permitted to revolt against their lawful ruler? On this see especially Van Gelderen, *Political Thought*, and Mout, “Van arm vaderland.”

⁸ Cordfunke, *Alkmaar ontzet*.

saying goes, victory began at Alkmaar. Forced to withdraw when the rebels cut the dikes and allowed the sea to flood the land, the Spanish army abandoned the reconquest of North Holland for the time being and marched south to lay siege to Leiden. Historians, glorified war correspondents as always, followed in its tracks: via the intermezzo of the battle of Mook Heath, through the relief of Leiden, the sack of Oudewater, and the capture of Zierikzee to the Pacification of Ghent, which ended the war on the soil of Holland and Zeeland for good.

No contemporary, rebel or loyalist, could have foreseen that the relief of Alkmaar would herald the final victory of the Revolt. In the following years the Spanish army made repeated bids to reconquer the rebel Northern Quarter. Hierges's frustrated invasion in May 1575 was only the last of those attempts. History written from the viewpoint of the victors has said almost nothing about the final fruitless efforts of the Spanish army after Alkmaar. Yet in August 1573 the royal army recaptured the Waterland villages of Landsmeer, Zuiderwoude, Zunderdorp, and Broek. In February 1574 it launched assaults on Wormer, Wormerveer, Jisp, and Krommenie. On Whit Sunday 1574 it suffered a catastrophic defeat at Wormer; after the battle the rebels slaughtered 150 German prisoners of war in cold blood.⁹ It will become evident that the character and course of the war in the Northern Quarter were largely determined by the geography of the region, its isolation and exceptional abundance of water. Moreover, this study will be more concerned with the war in the countryside than older works, which concentrated almost exclusively on the towns.

A final novelty in this book is that it describes the war from the viewpoint of its victims: the vagabonds and vagrants, of whom we often know no more than their name and place of origin, and the Catholic exiles who, like Wouter Jacobszoon, tried to survive in extremely difficult conditions in Amsterdam. That does not mean, however, that they must be regarded purely as passive victims of the Revolt. War and revolt often forced them to make dramatic choices. Some of them strained every sinew to free the country from the Spanish army, while others fled and lived as refugees in Amsterdam, where they had to accept the loss of their possessions, friends, and families.¹⁰

The story of the treason affair in the Northern Quarter is the history of scandalous excess. One may wonder how far it is representative, and what it tells us about the Revolt in general. It is by no means my intention to suggest that all sixteenth-century court officials were unscrupulous

⁹ The best account of military events in the Northern Quarter is still found in Velius. For the conflicts mentioned here see Velius, 216, 235, 239–42.

¹⁰ On the effects of the war on the civilian population, see Van Deursen, *Mensen van klein vermogen*, 229–59, and Gutmann, *War and Rural Life*.

power seekers, or that all the leaders of the Revolt saw a traitor behind every tree. The history of loyalty, treason, and alleged treason in the Revolt of the Netherlands is a rich topic that deserves further research,¹¹ but one must not expect it to bring to light numerous comparable cases. I am convinced, however, that the study of exceptional events and persons, as long as it is embedded in a social, political, economic, and cultural context reconstructed in as much depth as possible, can often yield a more penetrating insight into social reality than the study of “normal” practice and patterns of behavior. By looking at the abnormal, the exceptional, and the bizarre, the historian can form a clearer picture of the normal and everyday. The confused ideas of the cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller from Friuli can shed light on religious thought in the age of the Reformation; the minute examination of a single village in the Pyrenees in the thirteenth century tells us more about social and cultural relationships than a massive statistical investigation could reveal.¹²

The events described in this book took place chiefly in the part of Holland that lies north of the River IJ. In the sources this region goes under various names: the Northern Quarter, North Holland, West Friesland, the Northland, Waterland. All these names are more or less ambiguous, and they do not designate a clearly defined area. It will therefore be useful to explain them briefly.¹³

The name the *Northern Quarter* was in common use in the sixteenth century and still is today. In normal usage it designates the whole of the mainland of Holland north of the River IJ, but in the war years 1572–76 the southwestern corner of this area was still held by the Spanish army, and after 1576 it continued to be administered as part of the Southern Quarter of Holland. In his book on the Northern Quarter, A. M. van der Woude therefore confined the use of the name, for practical reasons, to the region between the IJ and an imaginary line drawn from Hoorn through Alkmaar to the North Sea. He referred to the area north of this line as West Friesland and to the whole peninsula north of the IJ and the *banne* of Velsen as North Holland.¹⁴

The name *North Holland*, often used to refer to the Northern Quarter, must be distinguished from its use as the name of the present-day province, which also extends south of the IJ.¹⁵

The name *West Friesland* applied in the strict sense to the bailiwick within the West Friesian enclosure dike, that is northeast of Kennemer-

¹¹ There is a good analysis of the problems in Duke, *Reformation*, chapter 8.

¹² Ginzburg, *Cheese*; Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou*.

¹³ Wagenaar, *Tegenwoordige staat*, V, 361–74.

¹⁴ Van der Woude, *Noorderkwartier*, 19–30. A *banne* was a jurisdictional district.

¹⁵ Bor, 502.

land and north of Waterland, but it was also used in a more general sense for the whole Northern Quarter outside Kennemerland, as in the phrase “The States of Holland and West Friesland.” Similarly, contemporary authors sometimes used the name *North Holland* to mean only the northern part of the peninsula, and sometimes the whole Northern Quarter or North Holland.

Waterland was properly the name of the bailiwick within the Waterland sea dike, but was also used as a synonym for the whole region, undoubtedly because of its exceptionally waterlogged landscape. The use of Waterland in this wider sense was particularly common on the government side. “The whole quarter of Holland that is called West Friesland, which is the Waterland, has long been full of Anabaptists,” Provost Morillon wrote to Cardinal Granvelle.¹⁶

In this book the names *Northern Quarter*, *North Holland*, *West Friesland*, *Northland*, and *Waterland* will be used to refer to the whole peninsula north of the IJ and the *banne* of Velsen. Whenever a geographical name designates a more restricted area, for example the bailiwick of Waterland, that fact will be made clear.

A second point of terminology that needs to be clarified is the expression the *Spanish army*, already used several times. In this *Spanish army* Spaniards were in the minority. In January 1575, for example, the army numbered 56,850 infantry, of whom 25,240 were Netherlanders, 23,600 Germans, and only 7,830 Spaniards (13.8 percent).¹⁷ To be sure, the Spanish companies formed the best-trained and most-experienced units of the army, which explains why contemporaries, both rebels and loyalists, spoke of the *Spanish army* when they meant the government forces. I shall follow this custom, but do not wish to imply that the Revolt must be seen as a conflict between Netherlanders and Spaniards. On the contrary, the size of the contingent recruited in the Netherlands shows how far the Revolt was in the first place a civil war.

¹⁶ CCG, IV, 174, Morillon to Granvelle, 13 April 1572.

¹⁷ Parker, *Army*, 271 (appendix A) and 25–35.