

The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands: How a country was without a King in the 16th century

It is 1588. The Dutch Republic, officially known as the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, is established. It consists of the provinces (the predecessors of today's Dutch provinces) of Friesland, Stad en Ommelanden (Groningen), Overijssel, Guelders (Gelderland), Utrecht, Holland, and Drenthe.

These provinces rose up against Philip II of Spain, who had inherited the territory from his father, Charles V. Together, they decided to form a republic. At the time, this was an extraordinary development: a European state without a king or another hereditary ruler was almost unheard of.

But how exactly did this republic come into existence? What roles did Philip II and Charles V play in its creation? And why did so many people from other parts of Europe choose to migrate to the Dutch Republic?

In this article, we will explore these questions—and many more.



Flag The Republic of Seven United Netherlands, known as the States flag. Source: wikipedia.org

Existence of the Republic

In 1581, the States General formally deposed Philip II as sovereign of the Netherlands through the Act of Abjuration (*Plakkaat van Verlatinghe*). The document declared that a ruler who oppresses his people forfeits the right to govern them.

The primary reason for this decision was the way Philip II ruled his empire—especially when compared to his father, Charles V.



Philip II inherited one of the largest empires in the world from his father. It included Spain, the Netherlands, Naples, Sicily, and the Duchy of Milan, as well as Spain's overseas possessions in the New World—such as Santo Domingo—and the Philippines.

Charles V was known for being closely involved in the territories he governed. He ruled much of his empire from Brussels, spoke several languages—including French, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish—and visited the Netherlands on a regular basis.

He also respected the local customs, privileges, and institutions of the Dutch provinces. Recognizing that each province had its own laws and traditions, Charles generally avoided interfering with them unnecessarily. In areas such as taxation and religion, he therefore allowed the Netherlands a considerable degree of autonomy.



Charles V. Source: canonvannederland.nl

His son Philip II was completely different. He had little connection to the Netherlands, did not speak the local languages, and rarely visited the region. Instead, he governed the area through representatives sent to Brussels, such as Margaret of Parma and the infamous Duke of Alba.

Philip II aimed to create a strongly centralized empire in which the same rules applied everywhere. As a result, the Dutch provinces gradually lost their traditional privileges and had less freedom to determine their own



policies. This caused widespread dissatisfaction, especially in the wealthier northern provinces.

These tensions eventually formed the foundation for the revolt against Philip II. In 1581, he was officially deposed as ruler of the Netherlands, after which the provinces began searching for a new sovereign. When this search had still produced no result years later, an extraordinary and unprecedented decision was made in 1588: the Netherlands declared itself a republic.

The Dutch Republic thus became one of the first European states without a king—a unique political experiment that would go on to change the course of history.



Philip II. Source: wikipedia.org

Catholic vs Protestantism

The Dutch Republic did everything it could to oppose Philip II—including in the religious sphere. After Martin Luther criticized the abuses within the Catholic Church through his famous theses, Protestantism began to emerge.



Within the Dutch Republic, Protestantism gained a dominant position. This made the country attractive to people who no longer felt safe in strictly Catholic regions of Europe. They could flee to the Republic and practice their faith with relative freedom.

An important factor in the spread of Protestantism was the so-called hedge sermons (*hagenpreken*). These were illegal open-air religious gatherings where the new faith was preached. These meetings often took place under the protection of local nobles.

However, the support from the nobility was not driven solely by religious motives. Political and economic interests played an equally important role. Under both Charles V and Philip II, high taxes were imposed to finance wars. In addition, Philip II's policy of centralization caused the nobility to lose power and traditional privileges within their own territories.

By supporting Protestantism, the nobility was therefore indirectly resisting Spanish rule while also attempting to preserve its own influence and rights.



Field Sermon of Utrecht. Source: verhaalvanutrecht.nl

This religious conflict reached its peak during the Iconoclasm of 1566, decades before the establishment of the Republic. Protestants entered Catholic churches and destroyed statues and other religious objects. In their view, the Church had accumulated too much wealth, power, and splendor—something they believed went against the principles of their faith.

For Philip II, a devout Catholic, this was unacceptable. He reacted with outrage. His half-sister Margaret of Parma, who was serving as governor of the Netherlands at the time, had, in his opinion, failed to take sufficient



action. After receiving the Compromise of the Nobles (*Smeekschrift der Edelen*), she reduced the persecution of Protestants, which Philip believed only created more room for unrest and rebellion.

In response, Philip II sent the Duke of Alba to the Netherlands. He took control of the government in Brussels and launched a harsh campaign against Protestants, whom he considered heretics. Under his rule, thousands of people were persecuted, imprisoned, or executed.



Burning at the stake in the Netherlands. Source:

geschiedenisvandaag.nu

Multicultural Republic

The persecution of heretics was one of the main causes of the Eighty Years' War, the long conflict between Spain and the Dutch provinces. During this period, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC) were also founded, greatly increasing the economic power of the Republic.

In 1648, the war came to an end with the Peace of Münster. This officially recognized the Dutch Republic as an independent country. It is important to emphasize that the Republic did not have a king, but was instead governed by regents and the States General.

The Republic gained a reputation as a relatively free country. Compared with many other European states, people had greater freedom to practice their religion and pursue economic opportunities. However, this freedom was not complete: non-Protestants were often treated as second-class citizens.



It was precisely this relative freedom that attracted many people. For example, French Calvinists, known as the Huguenots, fled to the Republic to escape persecution under Louis XIV.

Cities such as Amsterdam grew into global cities and major trading hubs, known as *entrepôts*. Through a combination of religious tolerance, trade, and entrepreneurship, the Republic developed into an economic superpower.

This period of prosperity would later become known as the Dutch Golden Age.



Amsterdam. Source: Historiek.net

Staple market in

Conclusion

At the time, it was highly unusual for a country to exist without a king or monarch. Yet the Netherlands discovered that having a ruler was not a requirement for success. In fact, the absence of an absolute monarch gave the provinces more freedom to determine their own course.

The Dutch provinces had always had a strong desire for independence. Charles V largely respected these traditions, which meant that relatively little unrest occurred during his rule. However, when Philip II ignored these local traditions and attempted to fully centralize his empire, it became one of the main causes of the revolt of the seven provinces.

After the Iconoclasm and the rapid spread of Protestantism, tensions escalated into open conflict. What followed was the Eighty Years' War—



a long struggle that ultimately ended in victory for the Dutch provinces. With the Peace of Münster, the Dutch Republic was officially recognized as an independent country.

Although the Netherlands is once again a monarchy today, this does not diminish how remarkable the Republic was. The country attracted international attention and became an example for other states in Europe. It proved that a nation without a king or hereditary ruler could not only survive, but even develop into one of the most powerful and prosperous states of its era.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Republic is the idea that power does not always have to come from above, but can also emerge through cooperation and shared interests.

Of course, there were other republics in Europe, but none achieved the same level of success as the Dutch Republic. (A small spoiler for a future article about San Marino.)

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