

William I, Prince of Orange (1533 - 1584)

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*"Je Maintiendrai,"
(I will maintain)*

-William the Silent¹

INTRODUCTION

William I, Prince of Orange, also known as William the Silent or more commonly known as William of Orange, led the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs which sparked the Eighty Years War and eventually gained formal independence of the United Provinces in 1581.²

EARLY LIFE

William I was born on 24th April, 1533 in the castle of town Dillenburg in the duchy of Nassau in the Holy Roman Empire, now in Hesse, Germany. He was the eldest son, among his four other brothers and seven younger sisters, of William, Count of Nassau, and Juliana of Stolberg-Werningerode. Though his mother was raised a Roman Catholic, she eventually changed her religion twice, first to Lutheranism and then to Calvinism. Juliana was particularly close to William I. When he began his rebellion against Philip II of Spain, she supported her son morally and financially. Because of his mother's financial support, William was able to campaign against Spain in the Netherlands.

In 1544, his life changed completely when his childless uncle, René of Chalons, was killed during the Habsburg siege of the French town of Saint-Didier. As the last representative of the house of Nassau-Breda, Chalons had appointed his young nephew as his heir. The heritage included not only large possessions in the Netherlands, but also the Principality of Orange in southern France. From now on, William was no longer the son of an insignificant German Count, but a Prince.

Emperor Charles V (ruled 1519–1556) summoned the young boy from his family's castle at Dillenburg to the Netherlands, where he became a page at the Imperial court and was raised as a loyal and Catholic nobleman. The years that followed saw the remarkable transformation of the son of a Lutheran German count into a French-speaking Burgundian noble. Under the guidance of the regent, Mary of Hungary, William grew into a handsome young nobleman, elegant and well-spoken in French and Dutch as well as in his native German, intelligent

and at ease with people.³ William I was ready to serve the Habsburgs.

STRUGGLES WITH THE SPANISH EMPIRE

William came under the particular attention of the imperial family, and was very well-liked. He was then appointed a captain in the cavalry in 1551 and quickly rose up the ranks to command one of the Emperor's armies at an early age of 22. During the same year, the abdication of Emperor Charles V in favour of his son, Philip II of Spain, due to illness, would assure that William I would continue to assist them.⁴ In 1559, William's political power greatly increased when Philip II appointed William stadholder (governor) of three provinces namely; Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht. A stadholdership over Franche-Comté followed in 1561.⁵

Although William never directly opposed the Spanish King, he soon became the most prominent member amongst the opposition in the Council of State, together with Philip de Montmorency, Count of Hoorn, and Lamoral, Count of Egmont. They were mainly seeking more political power for themselves against the current government that was mainly ruled by Spaniards. William was also

discontented with the increasing persecution of Protestants in the Netherlands. As mentioned, he was brought up a Lutheran and later a Catholic; William was religious but he supported the freedom of religion for all people. The Inquisition of the Netherlands, directed by the Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, increased opposition to Spanish rule among the then mostly Catholic population of the Netherlands.⁶ Lastly, the opposition did not want the presence of the Spanish troops in the Netherlands.

After marrying a second time, it was assumed that William married Anne of Saxony to gain influence in Saxony. William found increasing confidence in his alliance with the Protestant princes of Germany following his second marriage. He began to openly criticise the King's anti-Protestant politics. In an iconic speech to the Council of State, William, to the shock of his audience, justified his conflict with Philip by saying that, even though he had decided to keep to the Catholic faith, he could not agree that monarchs should rule over the souls of their subjects and take from them their freedom of belief and religion.⁷

In the early 1565, a large group of noblemen, including William's

younger brother, Louis, formed the Confederacy of Noblemen. On 5th April, they petitioned to end the Prosecution of Protestants. From August to October 1566, a wave of iconoclasm, the destruction of religious icons and other images or monuments for religious or political motives also known as Beeldenstorm, spread through the Low Countries. The Calvinists, which were mainly Protestant, and other forms of Christianity, such as Anabaptists, and Mennonites, were angered by the Catholic use of images of saints. In their eyes, it conflicted with the Second Commandment. Therefore, hundreds of statues in churches and monasteries were destroyed throughout the Netherlands.

Following Beeldenstorm, tensions in Netherlands grew and Margaret of Parma, governor of Netherlands, had to agree to the petition if the noblemen were to restore order to the Netherlands. However, Margaret did not fulfill her promise and soon several minor rebellions occurred which William was financially a part of. Following the announcement that Philip II, unhappy with the situation in the Netherlands, would dispatch his loyal general Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba, to restore order, many Calvinists and Lutherans fled the country. William I also retreated to his native Nassau in April, 1567.

In August 1567, the Duke of Alba established the Council of Troubles, to judge those involved in the rebellion and the iconoclasm. William was declared an outlaw, and his properties were confiscated when he failed to appear for a summons before the Council. As one of the prominent figures in Netherlands, William I emerge as the leader of armed resistance. This armed resistance would raid coastal cities of the Netherlands, where they often killed Spanish and Dutch. William would also raise an army, consisting mostly of German mercenaries, to fight the Duke.

WAR

In October 1568, William led his army into the Duchy of Brabant, a state in the Holy Roman Empire. However, the Duke of Alba carefully avoided a decisive confrontation. The Duke expected William's army to fall apart quickly. As expected, disorder broke out in William's army as winter was approaching and they lacked resources. So, William was forced to turn back. He had several more plans to invade in the next few years, but the plans were not executed as he lacked the support and money.

However, it was largely as a result of William's leadership that the rebels overcame their differences and continued their military struggle, seizing the opportunities caused by the large-scale mutinies of the unpaid and unsupplied Spanish troops.

During 1571 to 1576, William and his army were slowly occupying towns in Holland and Zeeland where they were mostly in the hands of the rebels. Most notable was the capture of the city of Brielle by privateers, who had raised the Prince of Orange's Flag above the city, after the local Spanish garrison had left it unattended.⁸ Together with the rebels, they almost captured the entire country. William then marched his army south where he won several more small battles. Eventually, Holland and Zeeland had to sign a treaty in 1576, the Pacification of Ghent.⁹

NETHERLANDS' INDEPENDENCE

When Don Juan signed the Perpetual Edict in February 1577, promising to comply with its conditions, the rebels felt that the war had been decided in their favour. The Calvinist rebels grew more radical, and attempted to forbid Catholicism in areas under their control. William was opposed to this both for personal and political reasons as he desired freedom of religion, and he also needed the support of the less radical Protestants and Catholics to reach his political goals. On 6th January 1579, several southern provinces, unhappy with William's radical following, signed the Treaty of Arras, in which they agreed to accept their Catholic governor, Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma

(who had succeeded Don Juan) to rule the Netherlands.

The Duke of Parma was successful in reconquering most of the southern parts of the Netherlands because he agreed to remove all Spanish troops. Hence, the Netherlands finally had their own king.

In March 1580, Philip II issued a royal ban of outlawry against the Prince of Orange, promising a reward of 25,000 crowns to any man who would succeed in killing him. William responded with his Apology, a document in which his course of action was defended. However, Philip tortured the messenger so viciously that he restated his allegiance for the Protestant faith.

DEATH

Balthasar Gérard, a subject and supporter of Phillip II, regarded William of Orange a traitor to the king and to the catholic faith. When Gerard heard of the bounty of 25,000 crowns for the assassination of William, Gerard decided to travel to Netherlands to kill William.¹⁰ Gérard went to the Duke to present his plans on killing William. The Duke was unimpressed but Gérard went ahead anyway.

Gérard presented himself to William as a French nobleman

and gave him a precious seal of the Count of Mansfelt as proof.¹¹ However, William sent Gérard back to France to pass this seal to his French allies instead. Unfortunately, Gérard returned armed and on 10th July, Gerard made an appointment to meet William in his house in Delft. After his dinner with his guest Rombertus van Uylenburgh, Rombertus heard Gérard shoot William in the chest at close range with a handgun. According to Rombertus, William's last words were, "My God, have pity on my soul; my God, have pity on this poor people."¹² Even as he lay dying, William still had the plight of the people on his mind.

Even though Gérard fled immediately, he was unable to even escape the city of Delft. On 13th July, 1584, a scant 3 days after William's death, Balthasar Gérard was sentenced to be brutally executed—even by the standards of that time.¹³ William I, Prince of Orange, holds the unfortunate record of being the first head of state to be assassinated by a handgun, and the second person to be killed by a firearm.¹⁴ William was supposed to be buried with his ancestors in the city of Breda, but due to the war he was interred in the Protestant church of Nieuwe Kerk in Delft instead.¹⁵ Since then, most descendants of the House of Orange-Nassau, including every member of the Dutch Royal Family, has been buried there.

CONCLUSION

William had never expected that such an important title would be thrust upon him at such a young age. While William fought for the freedom and independence of Netherlands with all his power and might, many regarded him as a traitor to his religion and principles. His aims were for the Netherlands to be independent of the Spanish empire, free from foreign intervention and for its people to have the freedom of belief and religion. William proved that he was indeed a capable leader who managed to unite both the merchants and rebels against the Spanish Habsburgs.

ENDNOTES

1. Kelley L. Ross, "Je Maintiendrai," *The House of Orange and Nassau*. <http://www.friesian.com/ross/orange.htm>.
2. United Provinces was the Dutch Republic in Europe that existed from 1581-1795 when they separated from Spanish Habsburg rule. It is one of earliest precursors to the modern Kingdom of Netherlands.
3. Biography. William the Silent Facts. <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/william-the-silent>
4. J. Thorold Rogers, *The Story of Nations: Holland*. London, 1889; Romein, J., and Romein-Verschoor, A. *Erflaters van onze beschaving*. Amsterdam 1938-1940. 150.
5. Wedgwood, C., *William the Silent: William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, 1533-1584*. (1944), 34.
6. Cardinal Granvelle was the leading minister to the Spanish Habsburgs.
7. "Prefigurations of the future? The views on the boundaries of Church and State of William of Orange and Viglius van Aytta (1565-1566)". A.A. McDonald and A.H. Huussen, *Scholarly environments: centres of learning and institutional contexts, 1560-1960* (2004), 15-32.
8. Wedgwood, C., *William the Silent: William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, 1533-1584*. (1944), 120.
9. They declared themselves ready to fight for the expulsion of Spanish troops together. However, they failed to achieve unity in matters of religion. Catholic cities and provinces would not allow freedom for the Calvinists.
10. "Mon Dieu, ayez pitié de mon âme; mon Dieu, ayez pitié de ce pauvre peuple." "De laatste woorden van prins Willem", *Maatstaf* 28 (1981), n. 12. 67-100.
11. This seal would allow forgeries of the messages of Mansfelt to be made.
12. "Mon Dieu, ayez pitié de mon âme; mon Dieu, ayez pitié de ce pauvre peuple." "De laatste woorden van prins Willem", *Maatstaf* 28 (1981), n. 12. 67-100.
13. Motley, John L. (1856). *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*, Vol. 3 <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4836/pg4836.html>
14. Jardine, Lisa. (2005). *The Awful End of Prince William the Silent: The First Assassination of a Head of State with a Hand-Gun*.
15. New and Old Church of Delft <http://oudeeenieuwekerkdelft.nl/new-church/royal-family/william-of-orange?scope=14>