

Spanish Tyranny and Bloody Placards: Historical Commonplaces in the Struggle between Dutch Patriots and Orangists around 1780?*

In September 1781, the Dutch nobleman Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol anonymously published his pamphlet, *To the People of the Netherlands*,¹ considered to be a core text of the Dutch Patriot Movement. During the final two decades of the eighteenth century, this group opposed the Orangists and their leader, Stadtholder William v of Orange-Nassau, contesting his authority and seeking to put an end to the abuses of what they considered to be a corrupt oligarchic system. They strove to reestablish old civil liberties and legal equality for all church denominations. A number of them also advocated the further democratisation of the Dutch political system.²

In this influential pamphlet Van der Capellen provides an interpretative commentary on Dutch history, clarifying how and when things had gone wrong in his country. He refers several times to the Dutch struggle for freedom from the Spanish Habsburgs during both the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. In a somewhat exaggerated manner, he describes Philip II,

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1 The Dutch title is 'Aan het volk van Nederland'. This pamphlet was soon translated into French, German and English. Quotes from the pamphlet in this paper are derived from *An Address to the People of the Netherlands, on the Present Alarming and most Dangerous Situation: Showing the True Motives of the most Unpardonable Delays of the Executive Power in Putting the Republic into a Proper State of Defence, and the Advantages of an Alliance with Holland, France and America* (London: J. Stockdale, 1782).

2 See E.A. [Lydie] van Dijk etc. (eds.), *De wekker van de Nederlandse natie: Joan Derk van der Capellen 1741–1784* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1984); Ewout Klei, "Notre Wilkes": De theatraal tegendraadse stijl van optreden van Joan Derk van der Cappellen tot den Pol, *Overijsselse historische bijdragen*, 120 (2005), pp. 104–127; Gijs Kuijper, 'Van voorbeeld tot vergetelheid: Amerika in Nederlandse publicaties', *Mededelingen van de Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman*, 26 (2003), pp. 158–166, at pp. 158–159; Maarten Prak, 'Citizen Radicalism and Democracy in the Dutch Republic: The Patriot Movement in the 1780s', *Theory and Society*, 20 (1991), pp. 73–102.

the prince to whom the rebellious Dutch renounced their allegiance in 1581, in the following manner:

Philip, King of Spain and master of our country, was an ambitious Prince, who like his father [Charles v] and his other ancestors, had deprived his subjects in Spain and his other dominions, of their liberties and privileges, and now intended to introduce slavery into our Netherlands.³

The message of these and similar phrases could not escape the readers of the time: the Dutch should not allow anyone to deprive them of their 'liberties and privileges' or 'slavery' would follow.

Van der Capellen was definitely not the first nor the only author using the images and events of the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648) to reinforce his argument. Quite the contrary, this had become common practice in the late sixteenth century and continued during the seventeenth.⁴ References to the Dutch resistance functioned as examples that were immediately understood by the Dutch populace. Whenever Dutch freedom was threatened, the call to remember those who struggled against the 'Spanish yoke' and to follow their example returned with force. The idea that the earlier struggle had been in vain was unthinkable to the Dutch, and it was imperative that the freedom gained would be safeguarded for the future. In the Dutch Republic around 1780, friends and foes were agreed on this; however, Patriots and Orangists strongly disagreed on the course of the Republic's political future and the structure of authority. In the light of this struggle it is interesting to examine how the rival groups began to use the memories of the rebellion for their own political gain. What symbolic value did they attribute to the persons, events and concepts that were deemed important in the late eighteenth century?

Following a general introduction to the people, events and concepts involved, I will respond to the question above using three texts and some pertinent examples. The three texts are a political petition from 1770 by Orangist Elie Luzac, the pamphlet by Patriot Van der Capellen from 1781 and some fictitious rhymed letters from 1785 by the political opportunist Joannes Nomsz. My purpose is to argue that some historical comparisons with and references to the Dutch Revolt in these sources may be viewed as commonplaces, or at

³ Van der Capellen tot den Pol, *An Address to the People of the Netherlands*, p. 9.

⁴ Judith Pollmann, *Het oorlogsverleden van de Gouden Eeuw: Oratie uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van bijzonder hoogleraar op het gebied van de Geschiedenis en Cultuur van de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden aan de Universiteit Leiden vanwege de Stichting Legatum Perizonianum op vrijdag 27 juni 2008* (Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2008), pp. 7, 12.