The tercios of Italy arrived in the Netherlands in August 1567 and quickly occupied the country. The Duke of Alba, who had led the soldiers to Brussels ordered the dismissal of most local troops and officers, the recruitment of reinforcements and the integration of all armed forces in the land under the direct control of a single high command led by himself and working with the administrative and tactical methods of the Spanish military, effectively hispanizing the armies of the Low Countries. Thus was born the Spanish Army of Flanders.1

Although he profited from long-established Spanish martial traditions and usages, Alba must be considered the creator of the Army of Flanders. As one of Europe’s most experienced soldiers, he was uniquely qualified to forge this army and impose his personal imprint on its organization. Born in 1507, Alba had been raised almost from the cradle to be a professional soldier in both theory and practice. Don Fernando saw his first battle at age six, had reportedly memorized Vegetius’ Roman military classic De Re Militari by age thirteen, and participated in most of the major campaigns of Charles V (r. 1515–1555) in Spain, North Africa, Italy, France, the Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire.2 In 1543 his efforts in defeating a French invasion of Catalonia the previous year earned him the commission of Captain General of the imperial troops in the Peninsula and he became the Emperor’s chief military advisor. This is a status that Alba retained under Charles’ successor in the Spanish throne, King Philip II

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2 The reference to his reading of Vegetius can be found in M. García Cerezeda’s *Tratado de las Campañas y Otros Acontecimientos de los Ejércitos de Carlos V*, as quoted in Miguel Alonso Baquer, “Las Ideas Estratégicas,” in Estado Mayor del Ejército, *Historia de la Infantería Española. La Infantería en Torno al Siglo de Oro*, (Madrid, 1993), 139.
The Italian campaigns of 1555–57 greatly enhanced Alba’s reputation as an effective commander and tactical innovator. The Duke received praise from both friend and foe and thus a decade later, when the King considered the appointment of a General to lead an army to the Low Countries, Alba was the natural choice.

Once in the Netherlands Alba put to use the tactical lessons of a lifetime to defeat and eject the Dutch rebel army from the country. Alba was the only Spanish General ever to rout the Dutch in decisive fashion and the only one ever to re-establish (albeit briefly) royal authority and Catholicism over the whole of the Low Countries. Coming after a lifetime of victories, these triumphs surrounded his leadership with a lasting aura of glory and invincibility that led to his being known among his contemporaries as “the father and master of the Spanish military,” a martial figure as important in the mid and late sixteenth century as don Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, the Great Captain, had been in earlier decades, a position that historians have yet to acknowledge.

Alba built his Army of Flanders by entrusting the officers he had brought from Italy with the command of all troops in the Netherlands and taking away most of those responsibilities from the local provincial

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4 For two examples of professional praise from the enemy see the testimony of François de la Noue in Mendoza, Comentarios, 468, and that of William of Orange:

“In Malines, some of the members of the Estates General told William of Orange that they were surprised that having brought such a large army, he had not relieved Mons…and he answered that no General could beat the Duke of Alba neither in fighting a battle nor in selecting a place to do it, because he was a great soldier and was regarded by all nations as such since the time of Charles V and that he [Orange] knew it.” Ibidem, 470.

5 For the intricate court intrigues that led to Alba’s appointment see David Lagomarsino, “Court Factions and the Formulation of Spanish Policy Towards the Netherlands (1559–1567),” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1973. I am grateful to Professor Lagomarsino for allowing me access to his dissertation.

6 Antonio Ossorio, Vida y Hazañas de Don Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Duque de Alba, (Madrid, 1945) (originally published in Salamanca 1669), 50. Ossorio, who was a member of the Toledo clan, wrote his highly laudatory biography in the 1650’s based on oral and documentary sources unavailable to today’s historians, especially since the burning of much of the Alba palace and archive in Madrid in 1936. His work is still quite interesting, though it must obviously be used with caution, and collated with other sources. For a sample of the sort of praise Alba received during his life see Juan Cristóbal Calvete de Estrella, Encomio de Don Fernando Alvarez de Toledo Duque de Alba, (Madrid, 1945), a Latin epic poem originally published in Antwerp in 1573 in which Alba is compared to the great military leaders of antiquity.