CHAPTER FOUR

OLIVARES’ STRUCTURAL REFORMS IN THE HIGH COMMAND

A. Ranks: leadership by committee

As we have seen, the growing complexity of warfare in the early years of the seventeenth century had generated new conflicts within the upper crust of the Army of Flanders. Olivares’ response to these tensions was determined by his notions of military science and his “falta de cabezas” theory. The Count-Duke, who seems to have given these matters considerable thought, divided military science into two separate fields: “lo discursivo” or the deliberative aspect and “lo mecánico” or the practical application and enforcement of earlier decisions. 1 Although these categories roughly correspond to our current notions of strategy and tactics, they quite probably derived from the valido’s understanding of the concepts of “sciencia y experiencia” present in the genre of the ideal officer. A personal interpretation of these concepts led Olivares to affirm that whereas professional experience was necessary to fight a battle, broad intelligence and common sense (a form of “sciencia”) were the only requisites to participate in “lo discursivo,” that is, in strategic deliberations. 2 Tactics could be “mechanically” (a pejorative term in contemporary Spain) and automatically carried out by officers in the

---

1 AGS E 2053, Discurso antecedente del Conde Duque al votar por votos secretos sobre cabezas para Flandes, n.d. [9–38].
2 For instance, in reference to the Cardinal-Infante’s failure to defend Fort Schenken- schans the Count-Duke argued that despite being a civilian he was entitled to question the cabos’ decisions because:

These are not issues for soldiers. A soldier fights, marches, attacks a town or goes to its relief and fortifies it and this is his trade. [However] to foresee the right course of action, investigate the enemy’s intentions, enforce obedience, pay the troops, safeguard their rights and duties, and do justice to the people, these belong to prudence and intelligence. Communications, information and negotiations, these are matters for the top leaders [of the monarchy].

AGS E 2052, Discurso sobre los despachos de Flandes, 9–9–37. See also a similar pronouncement in AGR SEG 674, Puntos de cartas del Conde Duque para Su Alteza, 1–37.
field. What the army most needed was a group of advisors, both professionals and gifted amateurs (which is obviously how Olivares thought of himself), who would devise an adequate strategy and mitigate what the Count-Duke perceived as a falta de cabezas. The valido hoped that his policy of collective command or juntas would compensate for the individual deficiencies of officers and the growing complexity of warfare but, as we shall see, it accentuated the high command’s structural disunity, prevented the army from adapting to the evolving logistical demands of seventeenth century warfare and contributed to the failure of the Count-Duke’s reform efforts.

The renewal of hostilities in 1621 revived controversies over the respective authority of ranks and army branches that had begun to plague the high command in the early seventeenth century. However, the presence of a forceful commander-in-chief, Spinola, and Olivares’ initial conviction that the war should be run from Brussels and not Madrid (due perhaps to his inexperience) kept these problems from rising to the surface and maintained the Army of Flanders operating with relative efficiency. This situation of comparative stability and order came to an end in 1628. The Council of State had never fully trusted Spinola who was Italian and after an acrimonious exchange of letters with the Council of State over the loss of Groenlo, Spinola asked for permission to leave the Netherlands. Perhaps don Ambrogio suspected that, given obvious signs of mistrust in his leadership he, like the Duke of Parma, might ultimately be recalled under less honorable conditions if he chose to stay. The upshot was that for the first time in his administration Olivares had to choose a commander-in-chief for the tercios. The Count-Duke’s indecision at this crucial moment, the probable result of his military inexperience and “humble” trust in professional soldiers, was among his greatest failures. The Cavalry

---

3 For Olivares’ early statements on the need for non-interference in military administration in the Netherlands see AGS E 2037, 14, CCE 10–5–23.

4 AGS E 2041, CCE 6–11–27, Ibidem, CCE 5–9–27 and AGS E 2320, Infanta Isabella to Olivares, 5–5–28: “I am shocked [españada] to see how little satisfaction with Spinola’s service there is in Madrid.” See also AGS E 2319, Spinola to Philip IV, 20–10–27. For further evidence of the Council’s long-standing distrust of Spinola see AGS E 2037, 5, CCE 28–1–23, in which some councillors protest Spinola’s authority to appoint officers in the royal armies. Undoubtedly the resentful letters of Cavalry General don Luis de Velasco who complained of being marginalized in the high command, contributed to this distrust: AGS E 2037, 20, CCE 24–6–23.

5 Matías de Novoa regarded it as the turning point in the war; Historia de Félip IV, Codoin LXXVII, 380–381.