THE IMPACT OF FRANCE UPON THE LOW COUNTRIES
FROM THE MIDDLE AGES UNTIL
THE 18th CENTURY

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From the early Middle Ages onwards, the Low Countries possessed cities fabled throughout Europe for their wealth and industry, but had few natural geographic barriers against invasion and no political unity. Consequently, they attracted the attention of powerful avaricious nations, especially France. From the Middle Ages until the 18th century (by which time the modern political configuration of the Low Countries had pretty well taken shape), the Low Countries were particularly subject to French pressure, as French political and military power alternately waxed and waned, and as the prestige and influence of the French language and culture grew steadily.

The period from the 10th until the 14th centuries saw the rise of the feudal states of the Low Countries including: the duchies of Brabant and of Limburg, the counties of Flanders, Hainaut, Holland and Guelders and the bishoprics of Liege, Cambrai and Utrecht. With the exception of the Count of Flanders, the rulers of all these states held their power as vassals of the German King (the Holy Roman Emperor). The Counts of Flanders held their territory (aside from Imperial Flanders) as vassals of the Kings of France. Thus, from the early Middle Ages on, the Low Countries, through Flanders, were politically involved with France.
Actually, during the 10th and the 11th centuries the French kings were weak. Consequently, the counts of Flanders were able to exert their influence south into Artois and even to play a part in the political power struggle around the French Crown. By the end of the 12th century, however, things had begun to reverse themselves. The victory of the French king Philip Augustus at the Battle of Bouvines (east of Lille) in 1214 reduced the Count of Flanders to submission. And during the 13th century the French kings not only strengthened their power over Flanders, but, taking advantage of the decline of Imperial Power, extended their influence beyond the borders of Flanders into the other feudal states of the Low Countries. Louis IX (1226-1270), for example, established the Parlement of Paris as the supreme court of appeal in Flanders and in Hainaut.

With the beginning of the period of the One Hundred Years' War (1328) the influence of the French Monarchy on the Low Countries went into a decline once again. And into the power vacuum stepped the Dukes of Burgundy. Beginning with the marriage of Duke Philip the Bold in 1369 to Margaret of Flanders, heiress of the County of Flanders and with Philip's subsequently becoming Count of Flanders (1384), the Burgundian dukes gradually became lords of many of the states of the Low Countries through marriage and treaty. Under the Burgundians of course the Low Countries were not free from involvement in the affairs of France. The Dukes of Burgundy were basically French princes tied up in the power struggles within France. Certainly this was true for the first two Burgundian overlords of the Low Countries: Philip the Bold (1384-1404) and his successor John the Fearless (1404-1419).

For a brief period between the end of the One Hundred
Years' War (1429) and the beginning of French attempts to wrest control of Italy from Spain (1494), the political and military power of the French kings was felt once again in the Low Countries. With the death of the last Duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold (1477), the French king Louis XI (1461-1483) or his successor Charles VIII (1483-1498) might have become the new lord (duke, count, and so on) of many of the states in the Low Countries. The States General (or parliament) of the Low Countries, however, turned instead to the Hapsburgs, partly as a result of the rapaciousness with which Louis XI had conducted his military campaigns against the Low Countries in the 1470's. And in 1477 Mary of Burgundy, the heiress of Charles the Bold married Maximilian of Hapsburg, heir to the Holy Roman Empire. In 1493, with the invasion of Italy imminent, Charles VIII gave up Artois, which his father had conquered, to Maximilian and turned his attention away from the Low Countries.

It is instructive to note that the States General did not think of declaring the Low Countries to be an independent nation. Such 19th and 20th century concepts were not available to the medieval mind. In accordance with medieval practice, political authority had to be exercised by the personal ruler of each state: the Count of Flanders, the Duke of Brabant, and so on. After the death of Charles the Bold, the States General had looked to Maximilian and the Hapsburgs to be the lords of the various states because it was assumed they would provide more just rule than Louis XI and his heirs, and that the Hapsburgs would allow greater independence to the provinces. It was also hoped that the Hapsburgs would be able to check the inveterate tendency of the French kings to conquer as much of the Low Countries
as possible and incorporate the conquered area into their realm. For more than 150 years the Hapsburgs, aided by internal divisions within France, would do just this. Ironically, however, the Hapsburgs themselves would become even greater enemies of provincial particularism in the Low Countries than the French kings had ever been.

Through many marriages over many generations the Hapsburgs had not only become the most powerful dynasty in central Europe and the overlords of the Low Countries, but beginning in 1504, they had also become the kings of Spain and of that nascent Spanish Empire which would provide so much silver and gold in the 16th and 17th centuries. Backed by the wealth of the Spanish Empire and of the Low Countries and possessing the invincible armies of Spain and armies from Germany, the Hapsburgs could not resist the temptation to establish an hegemony over Europe. And, consequently, throughout the 16th and 17th centuries the Hapsburgs would be at war, off and on, with France, and other states: something which would have momentous consequences for the Low Countries.

Until the 1630's the French kings were unable to challenge effectively the power of the Hapsburgs in the Low Countries, or elsewhere. The struggle between France and Spain over Italy, which had begun in 1494, was finally settled by the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559). Spain and the Hapsburgs were left dominant in Italy. The course of this protracted struggle saw the end of anything that was left of the political influence in the Low Countries which had been built up by Louis XI. By the Treaty of Madrid (1526) the French king Francis I was forced to proclaim that the Counts of Flanders and Artois no longer owed him homage as his vassals. The feudal connection
between France and the Low Countries had come to an end. Although there was considerable fighting between French and Imperial forces in southern parts of the Low Countries during the decades leading up to Cateau-Cambrésis, France's only acquisition in the Low Countries as a result of all the effort expended on her northern frontier was Calais, captured from the English in 1558.

By the late 1550's the Huguenots (French Calvinists) had become a major problem for the French king Henry II. And he had been ready to make peace with the Hapsburgs so that he could turn his attention to the religious and political divisions within his realm. Unfortunately for France, Henry died in 1559. And with his death she lapsed once again into a state of anarchy and powerlessness. Thus it was that France would not play a forceful role on the international stage until the 1630's.

Before going on to look at the political break-up of the Low Countries in the 17th century, we should look at the role of the French language and culture in the Low Countries up to the 17th century. Unlike French political and military power which alternately waxed and waned, the role of the French language and culture grew steadily.

One must keep in mind that the French language has always been an integral part of life in the Low Countries. The dividing line between the Romance and Germanic languages, dating back to the Germanic migrations to Gaul in the 5th century A.D., ran through medieval Flanders and Brabant. Consequently, French was the common language south of the line, in Flanders, Brabant, Hainaut, Liège and Cambrai. Furthermore, the brilliance of medieval French culture - its architecture, literature and courtly life - made much of an impression upon the Low Countries, even north of the
linguistic line. The French language became the language of many princely courts, of much of the noblesse and the upper bourgeoisie, and of much of the governmental and administrative life throughout the Low Countries. There was a certain snobbishness and class-consciousness involved in this. The peasantry, and the guildsmen of the medieval cities continued to use Flemish dialects.

The Counts of Flanders and of Hainaut seemed to have ignored the Flemish language and used only French. Of course, this was facilitated in Flanders by the fact that the counts owed allegiance to the French kings and that after the 12th century many of the counts themselves were of French origin. By the 13th and 14th centuries French had replaced Latin in the documents of Flemish cities such as Ypres and Cassel. In medieval Brabant, on the other hand, Flemish managed to maintain its grip with much more tenacity. At Antwerp and Brussels, for example, public acts were drawn up in Flemish. From the end of the 14th century the status of the French language generally in the Low Countries was furthered by the fact that the Burgundians and after them the Hapsburgs adopted French as much as possible for their government and administration.

One must avoid imposing 19th and 20th century ideas upon the medieval and early modern eras. The medieval and early modern concepts of political authority were not tied up with considerations about language and culture. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that political disputes in the Low Countries, particularly in Flanders, during the Middle Ages resulted in part from the cultural-linguistic division between French and Flemish. The defeat of the French king's knights at Courtrai (Battle of the Golden Spurs) (1302) largely at the hands of a force of Flemish
artisans represented an attempt not only to check the growth of French political power in Flanders but also to stop the spread of the French language and culture in Flanders. The efforts of the Dukes of Burgundy to use only French in their governmental and administrative affairs in the Low Countries as a means of centralising their power over the intensely particularistic states of the Low Countries caused much bitterness particularly against the last Burgundian duke, Charles the Bold. After his death in 1477 the States General of the Low Countries forced his heir Mary of Burgundy to recognise the vernacular of each area in the Low Countries as the official language of that area. Nevertheless, French language and culture would retain a position of prominence among the élites, of the southern provinces particularly, and would remain the language used by the central government and administration.

The provincial particularism and the intense dislike of any attempt to create a centralised and unified government and administration for the Low Countries, which had manifested itself after the death of Charles the Bold, led to open rebellion against Spain and the Hapsburgs during the reign of Philip II (1556-1598). Resentment which had been building against his predecessor Charles V (1519-1556) as a result of Charles' continuous demands for money for what, to the people of the Low Countries, were his "foreign" and pointless wars, grew under Philip. Philip too was desperately in need of money. Furthermore, there was much opposition to Philip's attempts to staff the upper echelons of the Church and the administration in the Low Countries with Spaniards, and there was much opposition to Philip's attempts to brutally suppress the growing Calvinist movement in the Low Countries. Under the leadership of William "the
Silent", Prince of Orange, representatives of seventeen states in the Low Countries signed the Pacification of Ghent (1576), whereby they all united to force Philip to govern in accordance with their wishes.

William may have had some idea of creating an independent and united nation out of the provinces of the Low Countries. The modern sense of nationality and national sovereignty was just beginning to emerge in the 16th century. Certainly William was dedicated to establishing an environment of religious tolerance throughout the Low Countries so that Catholics and Calvinists could live side-by-side in peace.

Capable and dedicated though he was, the divisive forces within the Low Countries proved too much for William. The basic linguistic-cultural split between Germanic and French must have been a factor, although it is hard to be precise about this. Some nobles, especially in the South, had long tended to ally themselves with France, as we have seen, while other nobles in the north and in the east tended to identify with the Germanic Empire. A more clearly divisive force was the traditional bitter economic rivalry between the towns. Similarly, the provinces each with their own institutions (including an Estates, or a parliament) and their own laws, traditions and elites had long been jealous of each other. Although there was some sense of belonging to the "Low Countries" the thing which had given some semblance of unity to political life in the Low Countries had been the personal tie of each province, or state, to the Hapsburg overlords, or before them to the Burgundians. It should be remembered that several of the northern provinces of the Low Countries had only become part of the system of personal union during the reign of
Charles V (1519-1556). And, of course, the bitter hatred of Catholics and Calvinists continued, exacerbated by atrocities which each side committed against the other.

Under Alexander Farnese, the Duke of Parma, a brilliant general and statesman, the Spaniards were able to play upon the divisions within the Low Countries. The best that William could do was to keep seven northern provinces (Groningen, Utrecht, Friesland, Overyssel, Guelders, Holland and Zeeland) from falling permanently to the Spanish armies. And if Philip had allowed Parma to concentrate upon reducing the Low Countries rather than having him dissipate time and resources in the attempted invasion of England and in involvement in the French civil war, he might well have succeeded in conquering all of the Low Countries except perhaps Holland and Zeeland.

With the fateful Truce of 1609 the Low Countries were divided into the independent United Provinces in the north, and the remaining ten southern provinces which became known as the Spanish Netherlands. And by the early 17th century the two areas had begun to assume quite separate identities, hostile to one another. Most important of all were the religious differences. In the north Calvinism dominated. The south was completely in the camp of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. The spirit of the north was typified by the aggressive and to the south, rapacious, mercantile community in Amsterdam. The cities of the south, some adversely affected by the north's blockading of the Scheldt, were slipping from their earlier positions of prominence. And rural life and the nobility were beginning to assume an increasing importance. Although the south contained both Flemish and Walloon (the north was solidly Dutch or Flemish) a common religion and a common loyalty to the Spanish
Hapsburgs provided a basis for a sense of common identity. So far apart had the two areas of the Low Countries drifted by the early 17th century that Holland now looked upon the Spanish Netherlands as foreign territory to be conquered and added to Holland's territory. In 1635 Holland and France joined in a war against Spain in the Spanish Netherlands and arranged for the division of the area between themselves. France was to get the Walloon provinces and Flanders (including Flemish-speaking areas and towns such as Ghent and Bruges). Holland was to get the rest.

In 1635 Europe was in the midst of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648): another effort by the Hapsburgs to assert their power over Europe. Until the defeat of the Protestant armies of the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus at Nordlingen (1634) by Imperial and Spanish troops, Cardinal Richelieu wisely kept France out of war, giving her time to recover from the effects of over half a century of civil and religious strife. Nordlingen, however, tipped the balance too much in favour of Hapsburg supremacy. The struggle between France and the Hapsburgs would really go on until the Peace of Utrecht (1713) and the destruction of Spain as a military power.

During the years 1635-1659 France managed to give a fairly good accounting of herself in the Low Countries against Spanish and Imperial forces, in spite of the Wars of the Fronde (1648-1653) which threatened to reduce France once again to a condition of anarchy and impotence. By the 1640's, prior to the Fronde, it became apparent that France might just succeed in taking all of the Spanish Netherlands for herself. Consequently, the Dutch forgot their treaty with France and made peace with Spain in 1648 (Peace of Westphalia). Holland obtained northern portions
of Flanders and Brabant. Fighting continued in the Low Countries between France and Spain until the Peace of the Pyrenees (1659). During the early 1650's, while France was still embroiled in the Wars of the Fronde, Spain was able to recapture Dunkirk, Ypres and other places close to France in the 1640's. As a result, in 1659, France had to settle for the acquisition only of Artois and certain military strongholds in Luxembourg, Hainaut and Flanders.

In 1659, Cardinal Mazarin (who, because of the youth of Louis XIV, was in effect the ruler of France) came under severe criticism for not having pressed on with the conquest of the Spanish Netherlands. In fact, such a conquest would have been difficult and lengthy for a country still recuperating from the effects of anarchy and civil war. In 1662 Louis XIV, having now taken over the helm himself, was able to purchase Dunkirk from the English for four million francs. Dunkirk had been given up by the Spanish to the English in 1658, after a joint French-English siege.

Under the firm guidance of Louis XIV the military potential of France at last began to manifest itself fully. The wars of Louis XIV commenced in 1667, not to end until 1713. Louis' motives for going to war were complex and have been much debated by historians. Certainly Louis was desirous of securing strategic defensive points on the periphery of his rather vulnerable realm in order to block access to foreign invaders. The acquisition of Dunkirk, and the conquest of Franche Comté on his north-east frontier, demonstrate this. And to this end he had Marshal Vauban construct fortifications during the 1680's across the Spanish Netherlands, most of which had been captured by the French. By the time Louis' wars came to an end, however, at the Peace of Utrecht (1713), France was able to hold on
only to certain southern sections of the Spanish Netherlands, including parts of Flanders and Hainaut. Spain ceded the remainder of the Spanish Netherlands to the Austrian Hapsburgs. And the area became known as the Austrian Netherlands.

Evidence indicates a considerable dislike of French annexation in the areas acquired by France. In 1669 Louis' minister, Louvois, reported back to Louis that "bad books" printed in Holland (encouraging the conquered areas to revolt against the French) were filling the bookstores in Lille. And in 1699, Marshal Vauban warned Louis not to abrogate the privileges of the Low Countries. The spirit of particularism was still alive to some extent.

It was probably the Flemish population in the newly acquired areas, mainly in Flanders, who most resented annexation by the French and the consequent decline of their language and culture. Thus, in the second half of the 17th century Michiel de Swaen, a Flemish poet and writer from Dunkirk could speak of the "Netherlands (meaning all of the Low Countries) so famous, so glorious, the most beautiful and the best part of the Spanish realm, the flower of Europe, the jewel of all the nations." And in the early 18th century the Flemish poet Andries Steven could lament the bastardisation of the Flemish language. He wrote that he shuddered to see the lion of Flanders, whose roaring had formerly made Europe tremble, brought to the ground, lifeless. 3

In spite of a certain resentment, on the whole, the population in the annexed regions seems to have adjusted to their new masters with resignation and without undue difficulty. One must remember that the language of much of the nobility and bourgeoisie and of much of the government and administration had long been French. The Low
Countries had had many foreign rulers for centuries, some of whom had been French or allied to France. As we have seen, there had been political involvements between the Kings of France and parts of the Low Countries since the early Middle Ages. And as we have seen, the sense of a common Low Countries identity, though existent, had remained weak.

The Austrian Netherlands remained politically free from France throughout most of the 18th century. Nevertheless, the French language and culture retained its position of supremacy there, aided by the influence of the French Enlightenment and the Austrian Hapsburgs' policy of continuing their predecessors' practice of conducting governmental and administrative affairs in French. The flowering of a Dutch civilization in Holland which accompanied the Dutch wars against Spain and then against France was not duplicated in the southern part of the Low Countries.

FOOTNOTES

1 See map of linguistic frontier on page 14.

2 See for example, Louis Trenard, Histoire des Pays-Bas français (Toulouse, 1972), chapters vi, vii.
