



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on February 4, 2022

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The Dutch Republic

“What other country [is there],” a wise man once wondered, “where you can enjoy such a perfect liberty, where you can sleep with more security ... and where there has survived more of the innocence of our forefathers?” Such sentiments, seemingly proper to de Tocqueville and early America, in fact issued from another Frenchman, in another time and place: René Descartes, in the 17th-century Dutch Republic.



Though born in France, Descartes spent most of his productive years abroad, in the tiny Dutch Republic, prodigy of western Europe’s early modern period. As were many other talented people from across Europe, Descartes was drawn to the Dutch political and economic miracle, a thing almost unheard of in an age of absolutism and religious intolerance: a free and prosperous republic that tolerated religious differences, freedom of speech, and an economy based on free enterprise. With its multiethnic cities, modern finances and international trade, and flourishing science, engineering, and art, the Dutch Republic, otherwise known as the United Provinces, was the first modern Western republic, admired and emulated in later years in England, America, and elsewhere.

Compared to many of its larger European neighbors, the Dutch Republic, which consisted of seven states corresponding to the modern-day Netherlands, did not enjoy optimal geography for the foundation of an independent republic. Unlike the Swiss Confederation, it had no mountains, and unlike Venice, it was not surrounded by water. It had a mild climate, abundant waterways, and plenty of arable land, to be sure, but it had no natural defenses against the many large and aggressive European states that coveted the lands of the Dutch for their wealth and access to the sea.

Not only that, the Dutch territories in the 16th century were part of an empire belonging to Spain, one of the dominions of the Habsburg dynasty. The seeds of revolt were sown by the Protestant Reformation, which for the Dutch took the form of pious Calvinism that not only objected to Catholic doctrines, but also to what they viewed as the lifestyle of worldly dissipation encouraged by Catholic culture. Dutch Protestants viewed themselves as thrifty, restrained, and otherworldly, while viewing Catholics as irreverently festive; but, perhaps because of mild manners and a penchant for tolerance, Catholics and Protestants managed to coexist more or less peacefully in the Dutch states for some time.

Tumultuous Times

All that changed when Phillip II of Spain, son of the formidable monarch Charles V, ascended to the throne in 1556. Unlike his polyglot father, Phillip spoke no Dutch and was seen as distant and tyrannical. Phillip soon embarked on a program not only to suppress Dutch Protestantism, but also to wrest power from the Dutch nobility. Adding insult to injury, he also levied steep tax hikes and installed his half-sister, Margaret, as governor. As the campaign to suppress the Calvinists intensified, so did Dutch resistance to Spanish rule. A petition submitted to Margaret to cease the persecution of Protestants was dismissed as the action of beggars (*gueux* in French), which epithet became the source



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of the Dutch term Geuzen, which the petitioners proudly adopted. It soon became the name for the Dutch noblemen who led what would become an 80-year war of independence against Spain, known to history as the Dutch Revolt or the Eighty Years' War.

In 1566, the revolt crystalized into more and more overt acts of violence against Catholic rule, including the *Beeldenstorm*, an outbreak of iconoclasm that featured attacks on many Catholic churches and monasteries for the purpose of destroying statuarities.

In response, Phillip sent the Spanish Duke of Alba the following year to Brussels along with 10,000 troops, under orders to crush the Dutch revolt by any means necessary. Alba promptly set up a special inquisitional tribunal tasked with ferreting out all Protestants and rebels — especially among the Dutch nobility. What followed was a reign of terror in which the “Blood Court” tried and executed more than a thousand Dutch citizens. These actions of the “Iron Duke,” calculated to cow the Dutch into submission, only hardened the resolve of the Geuzen.

As usually happens in time of crisis, a leader, in the person of William I of Orange, nicknamed “William the Silent,” stepped forward. A Dutch nobleman who had fortuitously escaped the wrath of Alba by taking refuge in Saxony, William returned to Dutch territory in 1568 with an army, intending, at least at first, merely to drive Alba back to Spain and restore the legitimate direct rule of Phillip. It is worth noting in this connection that the Dutch Revolt was not, in the beginning, a war of independence; the Dutch sought greater autonomy and religious freedom, but were not necessarily looking for complete independence from Spain.



Defender of the faith: Under Phillip II, the Spanish Empire reached its greatest heights, motivated in no small part by Phillip’s desire to defend Europe from the Ottoman Turks.

All of that changed, however, after the Battle of Heiligerlee, fought in the spring of 1568. Although Dutch forces led by William and his allies defeated the Spanish, they lacked the resources to continue the fight. Soon thereafter, William’s army fell apart, and the remnant forces were defeated by Alba. Although William himself escaped, the war against Spain appeared to be over. The surviving Geuzen forces took to the sea, with many of them fleeing to the safety of English ports.

Once more in firm control, Alba resumed his oppressive policies, levying a new 10-percent sales tax over the objections of local Dutch leaders, which once again inflamed popular passions. But the critical



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event that rekindled open hostilities was the surprise expulsion by Queen Elizabeth I of all the Geuzen from English ports. The British government did this to placate Spain, but the expulsion had unexpected consequences. The Geuzen fleet, bereft of their British havens, cast about desperately for a safe port on the European mainland. Led by the Dutch Lord of Lumey, they decided to hazard a landing at the lightly-defended Dutch town of Brielle. Against all expectations, they defeated the defending force and took possession of the town and its surroundings, thereby giving the Geuzen a foothold on Dutch soil once again.

The surprise victory at Brielle served as a rallying cry for the Dutch. Cities all across Holland promptly declared themselves for the rebellion, and resources poured in. Amsterdam itself tried to stay out of the fray, but finally came over to the side of the rebels six years later. As for the Dutch people, a minority of Catholics remained loyal to Spain, while the majority of Catholics (along with the Protestants) appear to have supported the revolt, wanting nothing more than to return to the peaceful, relatively tolerant, pluralistic society they had enjoyed under the more enlightened rule of Phillip's predecessors. Meanwhile, a ferocious minority of staunch Calvinist rebels intended to convert every Catholic to Protestantism — or else. William of Orange, now the undisputed leader of the revolt, had the unenviable task of trying to unite these factions while strengthening Dutch defenses.

The Spanish, meanwhile, prepared for all-out war — only to find themselves insolvent. After Spain declared bankruptcy in 1575, her foreign armies in northwestern Europe dissolved into mutinous companies. One of these, furious at not being paid wages due, sacked the city of Antwerp, killing at least 8,000 people. Following this so-called Spanish Fury, even the staunchly Catholic southern provinces of the Dutch territory (corresponding to modern-day Belgium and Luxembourg) joined the rebellion, allowing William to broker an agreement at Ghent in 1576 among all 17 of the Dutch states to practice religious tolerance and to unite in resistance to the Spanish forces.

This union was to be short-lived, however. Only three years later, the southern provinces decided to renew their allegiance to the Spanish crown, thereby becoming a haven for Catholics wishing to escape Protestant persecution. The northern provinces, in response, decided to formally sever ties with Spain and seek another sovereign as their patron.

In 1581, the States-General — the council composed of representatives of each of the northern provinces that for some years had served as the de facto government — passed the Act of Abjuration formally renouncing all ties to the Spanish crown. While similar in spirit to the American Declaration of Independence, the Act of Abjuration was intended to clear the way for allegiance to a new sovereign. Elizabeth I of England, though Protestant, was loath to interfere in continental affairs. The Dutch therefore turned to a French nobleman, Francis, Duke of Anjou, who had prompted the Dutch to abjure their ties with Spain as a condition for his assuming the crown. Anjou, a French Protestant and fiancé of Elizabeth I, was a natural choice for the Dutch, who still clung to the hope of a benign monarchy. But Anjou, dissatisfied with the limited powers allowed him by the States-General, decided to attempt reconquest of the Catholic southern provinces, beginning at Antwerp in 1583. The campaign was disastrous. Anjou's forces were destroyed, and Anjou barely escaped. In the wake of the debacle, Elizabeth I called off their engagement, and Anjou returned to Paris a broken man who succumbed the following year to malaria at the age of 29.

Meanwhile, the Dutch had run out of options. With Anjou and Elizabeth out of the picture, they finally decided to govern themselves as a republic, with the States-General as their governing body.



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Clash of wills: Phillip II confronting William the Silent, (right) the founder of the Dutch Republic and chief instigator of the Dutch Revolt. Although William was eventually assassinated by an agent of the Spanish, his name lives on in the Netherlands as Vader des Vaderlands, the “Father of the Fatherland.”

Following the Act of Abjuration, the Spanish, realizing the severity of the situation, sent another army to crush the Dutch once and for all. Although they managed to solidify their hold on Flanders and the southern provinces, they were unable to make any headway in the Dutch heartland. However, they did manage to strike one devastating blow to the fledgling republic: In 1585, William of Orange was assassinated in Delft by a Frenchman who was an agent of the Spanish, Balthasar Gerard, who befriended the Dutch leader in the guise of a sympathetic French nobleman. The assassination was the first of a head of state to be carried out with a handgun, and Gerard’s punishment was in keeping with the brutality of the times: He was burned and maimed before being dismembered and disemboweled while still alive.

Bereft of their leader, the Dutch turned to William’s son Maurice, who fortunately turned out to be an extraordinarily able military commander. As the war dragged on through the end of the 16th century and into the early 17th, Maurice of Orange led the Dutch to victory after victory along the borders of Dutch territory, wresting one town after another from the Spanish and in the process defining what would become the borders of the modern-day Netherlands.

A New Government

In their epic struggle against what was at the time the world’s mightiest empire, the Dutch were aided by external factors that weakened and distracted the Spanish forces. In 1588, the English defeat of the Spanish Armada at Gravelines (with the help of the Dutch navy) first showed the world that the Spanish were not invincible — and dealt a crippling blow to the Spanish treasury into the bargain. That same fateful year, the Dutch officially formed a confederacy, marking the formal founding of the Dutch Republic. In 1595, France declared war against Spain, requiring the Spanish to focus their energy on the much- more-powerful French state, and allowing the Dutch further opportunities to consolidate their gains.

In 1609, a peace between the still-unrecognized Dutch Republic and Spain was brokered by France and England, leading to a 12-year truce. But in 1621, in the larger context of the Thirty Years’ War that had



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divided most of Europe between Catholics and Protestants, the Eighty Years' War resumed. Still determined to bring the rebellious northern provinces to heel, the Spanish once again sent a large army to attempt a reconquest.



Spanish fury: The Dutch Republic flourished for decades while war raged on its periphery. Although the Spanish logged many successes in outlying areas, such as the Flemish town shown here, they were never able to penetrate the Dutch heartland or achieve any decisive conquests of core Dutch population and economic centers such as Amsterdam.

Despite a notable Spanish victory at Breda in 1625 (where Maurice also died), the later phase of the war was mostly marked by Dutch victories on land and sea, including actions against overseas Spanish colonies. The decisive victory for the Dutch finally came in 1639 at the epic naval engagement known as the Battle of the Downs. On October 21 of that year, a Dutch naval force commanded by Maarten Tromp, after surrounding a Spanish armada at anchor off the coast of England, launched an all-out attack featuring fireboats as well as the usual gunships. The Spanish and their Portuguese allies suffered a resounding defeat with heavy casualties, including boats destroyed by fire and other vessels that were deliberately run ashore to avoid a similar fate — only to be picked clean by English locals. Although the Battle of the Downs did not end the war, it was — like the Battle of Yorktown almost 160 years later — the final decisive engagement that guaranteed the victor. Indeed, the battle permanently broke the power of the once-vaunted Spanish navy, leading to Spain's downfall as the world's naval superpower and the eventual ascent of the French and English in its place.

In January 1648, as part of the broader Peace of Westphalia that ended the long and bitter Thirty Years' War, the Dutch and the Spanish signed the Treaty of Munster formalizing the independence of the Dutch Republic and leading to universal recognition of a sovereign and independent United Provinces, as the Dutch Republic was formally known.

The Eighty Years' War, one of the longest wars of independence in history, had surprisingly little effect on the Dutch heartland through most of its duration, nearly all of its decisive campaigns being fought on the borders and at sea. During most of the war, therefore, even during times of open hostilities, the little Dutch Republic and its estimated population of less than 1.5 million became an unexampled haven of peace, liberty, and prosperity to which talent and oppressed minorities flocked from far and wide. One minority in particular, Spain's Sephardic Jews, having suffered expulsion from Spain in 1492,



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immigrated in large numbers to Amsterdam, lured by that city's reputation for religious tolerance. There, they formed a very large subculture from which issued a continuous stream of literature published in Hebrew. One of the most eminent of these Jewish immigrants was Baruch Spinoza, a professional lens grinder as well as a philosopher and scientist, whose writings, along with those of Englishman Sir Francis Bacon and Frenchman René Descartes (who spent more than 20 years in the Dutch Republic), laid the philosophical foundations for the modern age of reason and the scientific revolution.

Golden Age

During the period from 1588 until 1672, known as the Dutch Golden Age, the Dutch Republic was the prodigy of Europe. The monarchy and accompanying rigid feudal order having disappeared, the Dutch Republic fostered the rise of the first modern middle class and became the vaunted "nation of shopkeepers" ideal later realized in England and elsewhere. Life for ordinary people in the Dutch Republic featured a level of luxury and enjoyment not enjoyed by so broad a class of people since at least the Roman era. Food and recreation were plentiful, and labor for many involved the satisfaction of personal capital accumulation instead of the soul-wrenching serfdom that had everywhere been the rule in former ages. Much to the well-documented astonishment of foreign visitors, Dutch cities were almost bereft of the hordes of beggars that inhabited other European cities, and the streets and buildings were everywhere well-maintained.

This enormous prosperity can be traced to the implementation of something approaching a free market system, where people were rewarded directly for their industry and thrift, irrespective of race, religion, or social status. Modern banking and finance were invented in Amsterdam during the Golden Age; that city became the site of the world's first stock exchange, with the Dutch East India Company the world's first joint-stock corporation. The Bank of Amsterdam, the first modern bank, quickly earned international renown for its stability, and wealth flowed into it from every corner of Europe. The Bank of Amsterdam was, for nearly 200 years, a full reserve bank, meaning that — unlike all modern banks — no fraction of reserves deposited on demand was loaned out. It instead made money by charging fees for the right to deposit funds, and also created the first-ever international reserve currency, fully backed by specie: the bank guilder.

Along with the stability of its internal finances and the comparatively laissez-faire attitude of its government, the Dutch were the beneficiaries of a worldwide trading empire, including not only their pivotal position as the hub of sea trade between northern and southern Europe, but also growing dominions in the East Indies and in the New World.

The creation of immense wealth allowed the arts and learning to flourish. The Dutch Republic became a republic of books, as the first modern publishing industry sprang up, supplying books for those thirsty for education all across Europe and in many languages, including not only the likes of English, German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, and French, but also in less widely spoken languages such as Swedish and Hungarian. A surge of immigrants seeking religious freedom, many of whose skills lay in the publishing of materials deemed blasphemous or seditious in their homelands, created a ready-made pool of publishing talent that flooded markets both national and international with the first mass-produced books, pamphlets, journals, and newspapers.

Additionally, the Dutch Republic saw the founding of a welter of new universities, including the most



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eminent, Leiden, founded by William the Silent, to which much of Europe's top intellectual talent was drawn. Samuel Pufendorf, the great German political philosopher, spent time at Leiden to avoid persecution at home. Pufendorf's magnum opus, *The Law of Nature and Nations*, scarcely appreciated today, is a magisterial work of political philosophy upon which later thinkers, such as Locke, Montesquieu, Blackstone, and many of the American Founders, drew heavily; it is probably the first European work of political philosophy wherein the practice of chattel slavery is roundly condemned. Other eminent scholars who made their home at Leiden during the Golden Age included John Comenius, the Czech-born philosopher and educator who is regarded as the father of the modern university system; Joseph Scaliger, one of the first Orientalists in Europe and one of the first western Europeans to master Arabic; and Justus Lipsius, eminent Classicist and four-time rector of the University of Leiden, under whose leadership the university enjoyed its greatest growth.



Multinational corporation: The ships of the Dutch East India Company, perhaps the largest company ever to have existed, brought Dutch and European commerce to the farthest corners of the Earth.

Christiaan Huygens, the greatest scientist and mathematician of the age except for Newton, was also a product of Leiden, although he eventually returned to his family home in The Hague to devote himself entirely to a career of independent research that won him international renown for contributions such as the invention of the pendulum clock and the wave theory of light. In his later years, he met the younger Isaac Newton and corresponded with him for the rest of his life.

A different type of scientist altogether, but perhaps no less consequential than Huygens, was the dauntingly named Antonie van Leeuwenhoek. A thoroughgoing amateur, van Leeuwenhoek was a successful linen draper in Delft who, in his spare time, invented the microscope, and with it the science of microbiology. It was van Leeuwenhoek who first discovered the teeming world of one-celled "animalcules" inhabiting the water and soil, as well as the cellular structure of plants and many other microscopic novelties. Considering himself a simple businessman, van Leeuwenhoek never published a single scientific paper, but corresponded with scientists for many years. As his fame spread, many eminent Europeans beat a path to his humble home, including Russian Czar Peter the Great, a great patron of the arts and sciences, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the great German philosopher and scientist.

Nor was van Leeuwenhoek the only world-class talent living in Delft in the 17th century. His



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contemporary, the great painter Jan Vermeer, also lived there, only one of an impressive array of Golden Age artistic talent that also included Pieter Brueghel the Younger (Pieter Brueghel the Elder belonged more properly to the antecedent Northern Renaissance) and Rembrandt.

On the more practical side, Dutch engineering and architecture were the envy of the world, as the industrious Dutch built up their cities, dug new canals, and reclaimed significant territory from the sea itself thanks to an ever-expanding system of dikes.

The Dutch economic, social, and cultural miracle is usually ascribed to its extraordinarily limited government. The Dutch Republic, or United Provinces, was a confederation of seven mostly autonomous provinces that supplied delegates to the sole national governing body, the States-General. As with the early American government under the Articles of Confederation, the States-General were limited in their authority to foreign affairs and warfare. While not immune to the authoritarian impulses of the age, the Dutch authorities were generally tolerant of religious and political dissent, and were willing to resist the temptation to micromanage business and finance as long as tax revenues flowed into the public coffers.



Taking stock: In 16th- and 17th-century Amsterdam, joint-stock companies and stock exchanges were invented, along with many other novel financial instruments. These, along with the Bank of Amsterdam's prudent reserve policies, transformed Amsterdam into the trade and financial capital of the entire world.

The Dutch were divided into two political camps, the *Staatsgezinden*, or republicans, and the *Prinsgezinden*, or monarchists, also known as Orangists after the Dutch royal house of Orange. The republicans favored a weak central government composed of the States-General, while the monarchists preferred a system whereby each province appointed an aristocratic Stadtholder, or governor, chosen from the House of Orange, as a counterpoise against the interests of private capital. For two extended periods when republicans held sway, the Dutch Republic, bereft of Stadtholders, had no aristocratic component at all.

The towering political figure of the Dutch Golden Age was Johann de Witt, an extraordinary statesman and accomplished mathematician who was appointed Grand Pensioner of Holland, the most powerful of the United Provinces. As de facto leader of the republic, he guided the Dutch through war and peace, achieving renown for forcing the English to terms in the second of two Anglo-Dutch wars, after the



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Dutch destroyed a large part of the British navy in a surprise raid masterminded by de Witt himself. A republican, de Witt opposed the leadership of Stadtholders while seeking continually to mollify the Orangists.

Abrupt End

The Dutch Golden Age came to an abrupt and terrible end in the year 1672, known to Dutch history as the *Rampjaar* (“Disaster Year”). It was in that year that France and England jointly declared war on and invaded the Dutch Republic, overrunning most of its territory before allies in the Holy Roman Empire, Denmark, and (ironically) Spain came to the aid of the Dutch and, after several years of bitter fighting, forced the reinstatement of the republic’s borders. But the Dutch Arcadia had been spoiled. At the outset of the crisis, the Orangists turned on de Witt and lynched him in The Hague, with the bloodthirsty mob hideously mutilating his corpse. After that, political power oscillated between Orangists and republicans, fatally weakening the body politic even as the Dutch Republic’s finances were strained by maintaining a huge navy to protect against the growing French and English menaces.



War without end: One of the longest wars of independence in history, the Eighty Years’ War, or Dutch War of Independence, was waged against the Spanish Empire at the height of the latter’s power, a David and Goliath story that served as backdrop for the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic. (Photo credit: David Teniers the Younger)

The last hurrah for the Dutch republicans came in the 1780s with the *Patriottentijd* (“Time of Patriots”), in which the Dutch, inspired by the American and Swiss examples, organized popular militias to restore and safeguard republicanism. Unfortunately, an invasion by the Prussians in support of the monarchist cause suppressed the movement in 1787. Only eight years later, the Dutch Republic fell to French Revolutionaries, who expelled the last Stadtholder and set up the Batavian Republic, a militantly secular revolutionary state modeled after radical revolutionary France, and wholly subservient to it.

The lessons of the Dutch Republic were not lost on the American Founders. Although widely admired for its remarkable achievements (John de Witt was the pen name chosen by one of the Anti-federalists), the Dutch Republic was seen as flawed for the haphazard construction of its government. Of the United Provinces James Madison wrote, in *The Federalist*, No. 20:

What are the characters which practice has stamped upon [the United Provinces]? Imbecility



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in the government; discord among the provinces; foreign influence and indignities; a precarious existence in peace, and peculiar calamities from war. It was long ago remarked by Grotius, that nothing but the hatred of his countrymen to the House of Austria, kept them from being ruined by the vices of their constitution.

As the first modern Western republic, the Dutch Republic showed what was possible in the absence of the overweening influence of nobility and stifling bureaucracy. Despite, or perhaps because of, the ever-present peril of destruction by its many more-powerful foreign enemies, the republic — with its pluralism, free markets, advances in the arts and sciences, encouragement of free thought, and burgeoning middle class — became a template for the modern Western state, prefiguring centuries in advance the limited popular governments that have become the order of the day across the Western world and beyond.



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