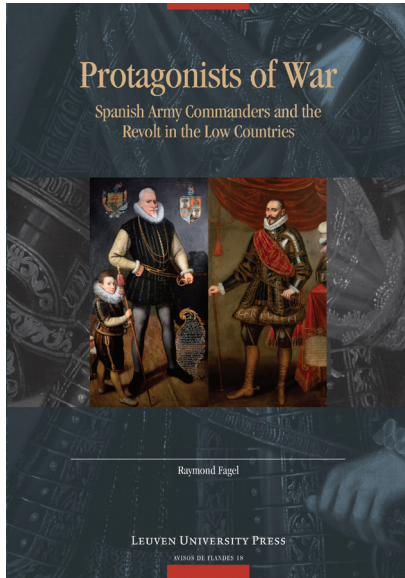


Review

Raymond Fagel, *Protagonists of War. Spanish Army Commanders and the Revolt in the Low Countries*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2021, 387 pp. ISBN 9789462702875.



Raymond Fagel has published extensively on the soldiers, officers, and campaigns of the Dutch Revolt, and much of this work has drawn on contemporary and later historical narratives of campaigning and the lives and actions of military commanders. The current book draws together a great deal of this research into a detailed study of the lives and posthumous reputations of four Spanish senior officers serving in the Netherlands in the late 1560s and 1570s. These four – Sancho Dávila, Julián Romero, Christóbal de Mondragón, and Francisco de Valdés – have claim to be among the best-known figures serving in the Spanish Army of Flanders. All four were celebrated and execrated in Spanish and Dutch writings during their lives and posthumously, and form part of the collective cultures, part fact, part fiction, through which the Netherlands Revolt was conceptualized. Fagel's

primary aim in this study is not to provide straightforward biographical accounts of four military commanders and their contribution to the Spanish war effort in the Netherlands. Indeed, a reader approaching the work from this perspective, and especially without prior knowledge of the details of the Duke of Alba's military campaigns and the tangled politics and military affairs of the mid-1570s, might well find the four narratives frustrating in their repeated accounts of the same events, and the way that the personalities reappear and overlap in each other's narratives, leaving a certain unavoidable sense of *déjà lu*. That said, the narratives certainly provide in places distinctive and important insights for an understanding of the wider Dutch Revolt. In one example, although Fagel published an article on the subject in 2020, his study of Sancho Dávila here highlights his revisionist interpretation of the 1576 'Spanish Fury' at Antwerp, stressing the centrality of the poisonous relation between Dávila and the governor of Antwerp, Frédéric de Champagny, in what is described as closer to an urban civil war.

The substance of the book, however, is composed of the four free-standing studies in which the personalities, actions, and historical reputations of the officers are examined through a wide variety of sources – chronicles, biographies, plays, and even historical novels – that are set against the detail that can be assembled from administrative and governmental correspondence and their own official and private letters. The narratives examine a wide range of accounts in which these Spanish officers are discussed, written from perspectives that range between the extremes of ‘Black Legend’ condemnation by the Dutch and Spanish virtual hagiography, and covering shades of opinion in between in which perspectives shift over time, and vary dramatically between characters. From quite early on, Mondragón and Valdés were treated sympathetically in Dutch accounts, if not as friends of the Revolt, at least as officers who behaved honourably and sought to mitigate the brutal excesses of other Spaniards. Dávila, by contrast, was painted as an uncompromisingly harsh commander driven by Catholic bigotry, although even Spanish accounts were divided in their opinions, some stressing his unreliability in service and immoderate pursuit of self-interest. Most striking about Fagel’s approach is that he reveals the lack of narrative consistency or consensus about the reputations of these officers. The early modern sources are surprisingly nuanced in their interpretations: the Dutch chronicler, p.c. Hooft, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, provides numerous anecdotes from the life of Julián Romero – widely adopted by subsequent writers across Europe – which stress Romero’s bravery, leadership, and loyalty, yet adds to this the ‘Spanish’ vices of vanity and hypocrisy to present a personality who was unstable and untrustworthy. The accounts that present Mondragón as a noble hero prepared to defend the Netherlanders against Spanish excesses are tempered by large amounts of conflicting accounts and evidence, not least from Spanish writers, who present him in a less favourable light, and who themselves have drawn from dissenting voices amongst Netherlandish writers such as Maximilien Morillon. To a large extent, the malleability, contradictions, and diverse interpretations of these figures are rightly presented by Fagel as inherent to the process of narrative appropriation and re-creation. Indeed, showing the numerous ways that the presentation of the actions, motives, and reputation of these figures have been shaped through the hands of chroniclers, historians, and playwrights is key to these accounts. Yet stressing this aspect of the study would understate the extent that Fagel has also deployed a wealth of administrative and personal correspondence to set the anecdotes, interpretations, and assumptions against a more substantive, verifiable account of the lives and actions of these men.

In consequence, while the book tells us much about their shifting historical reputations from the sixteenth century to the present day, it also offers detailed evidence about the dynamics of military service for these officers in the Army of Flanders. Some commonalities are apparent: none of these men came from a high-ranking noble family background, and three out of four looked to the Duke of Alba for recognition and favour, and were seen as his *Albistas*, paid-up clients. These were men whose only route to career advancement and rewards lay through demonstrating outstanding military prowess and leadership, and they relied on Alba to give them the military opportunities, make known their achievements, and to petition the king for recognition on their behalf. It might be assumed that Julián Romero, whose relations with Alba and the *Albistas* were consistently poor, would have profited from the arrival of Luis de Requesens as the new governor; but while the

other three officers certainly felt the chill of a superior who considered himself under no obligation to favour their actions or petitions, Romero does not seem to have benefited from the change of command. In a private, cyphered letter, Requesens wrote that while Romero was an outstanding executor of military operations 'if he has to be guided by his own head he is worth nothing', adding that his troops hated him 'worse than the devil' (76). It is certainly the case that a rhetoric of devoted service to the crown was an essential element in these officers' self-fashioning, while their military skills are heavily emphasized – none more so than Valdés, whose military treatise, the *Diálogo militar*, has canonical status in Spanish literature on the art of war. Yet Fagel never lets us forget that these were men driven by intense personal ambition for both material and honorific rewards, and the often uncompromising language of their correspondence makes explicit their belief that service deserved recompense. It is perhaps significant in this respect that all four were involved in mutinies by the troops in the Army of Flanders, and their roles emphasize what is increasingly coming to be understood as the murky and ambivalent role played by senior officers in these events.

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