

The trap of history

The States Party and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1650–1660

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Abstract

Historians of the First Stadholderless Period (1650–1672) have shown that supporters of the house of Orange evoked memories of Prince William I of Orange's role in the Revolt of the Netherlands in support of their political agendas. Jill Stern has recently argued that the supporters of True Freedom therefore needed to develop an alternative interpretation of the Revolt. Since she focuses on Orangist rhetoric, she has not asked why authors who sympathized with the States Party related their political ideology to the existing popular historical narratives about the conflict. These were, after all, tainted by Orangist associations. This article will argue that the past was a rich source of inspiration for politicians in the seventeenth-century 'present' but that the use of historical references was limited by the existing dominant storylines.

Keywords: First Stadholderless Period (1650–1672), Orangism, True Freedom, States Party, memory politics, Dutch Revolt

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Historians have contended that the political usage of references to the Revolt of the Netherlands (1566–1648) had its real origin in the eighteenth century. They consider the rise of interest in national history a phenomenon of the Enlightenment and, in the Dutch context, the result of a growing popular awareness of real or imaginary economic and moral decline. I. Leonard Leeb, for example, has shown that revolutionaries and their opponents at the end of the eighteenth century revived popular interest in the national past to cloak their arguments ‘with the wisdom of age and the sanctity of precedent’.¹ Joop Koopmans has demonstrated that rivalling Orangist and Patriot factions in the 1780s used memories of the Revolt in their political struggles.² And Wijnand Mijnhardt and Margaret Jacob have argued that a widespread feeling of decline in the eighteenth century ‘produced a new national consciousness that drew its inspiration from the past’.³ These scholars suggest that the politicization of national history was a new development in the eighteenth century.

Pieter Geyl and G.O. van de Klashorst, and more recently Judith Pollmann, Jill Stern and Ingmar Vroomen, however, have revealed that the political deployment of the national past was not very new in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. They have shown that supporters of the house of Orange (which had played a leading role in the sixteenth-century struggle against the Habsburg overlord) and their adversaries (who disapproved of the princes of Orange having political influence) prolifically commemorated the Revolt of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century.⁴ Furthermore,

* I would like to thank Judith Pollmann and Mark Leon de Vries for helpful comments.

1 I. Leonard Leeb, *The ideological origins of the Batavian Revolution. History and politics in the Dutch Republic 1747–1800*, The Hague 1973, p. 4–5.

2 J.W. Koopmans, ‘Spanish tyranny and bloody placards. Historical commonplaces in the struggle between Dutch Patriots and Orangists around 1780?’, in: J.W. Koopmans and N.H. Petersen (eds), *Commonplace culture in Western Europe in the early modern period III. Legitimation of antiquity*, Leuven 2011, p. 35–36, 54.

3 M.C. Jacob and W.W. Mijnhardt, ‘Introduction’, in: Jacob and Mijnhardt (eds), *The Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century. Decline, Enlightenment, and revolution*, Ithaca (NY) 1992, p. 13; see also J. Kloek and W. Mijnhardt, 1800. *Blauwdrukken voor een samenleving*, The Hague 2001, p. 213–221.

4 P. Geyl, ‘Het stadhouderschap in de partijliteratuur onder De Witt’, in: P. Geyl (ed.), *Pennestrijd over Staat en Historie*, Groningen 1971, originally published in 1947, p. 3–71; G.O. van de Klashorst, ‘“Metten schijn van monarchie getempert”. De verdediging van het stadhouderschap in de partijliteratuur, 1650–1686’, in:

Judith Pollmann has demonstrated that anti-peace propagandists used references to the first decades of the Revolt, the 1560s, 70s and 80s, to convince the population of Spain's unreliability and to mobilize as many people as possible against peace. This political exploitation of the past at the beginning of the seventeenth century resulted in a popular historical canon, a sequential narrative that reduced the conflict to the bare essentials of Dutch victimhood and Spanish evil.⁵ Recurring episodes in the canon were, for instance, the religious persecutions of Philip II in the 1550s and 60s, the indigenous nobility's plea for moderation of the religious placards (1566), and the unpopular governorship of Fernando Álvarez de Tolédo, duke of Alba (1567–1573).⁶ For the narrative to serve an anti-peace political agenda, it needed to be relatively tolerant in its coverage and interpretation of past events, which explains why most political references to the Revolt published in the Republic were fiercely anti-Spanish but not characterized foremost by a distinctly anti-Catholic tone. With a substantial part of the population still adhering to Catholicism, such an approach would be counter-productive.⁷ The canonical narrative lost this open character, however, when it became contested in the domestic struggles between two factions within the Reformed church during the Twelve Years' Truce (1609–1621). Due to the ultimate victory of the orthodox Counter-Remonstrant faction, and of their protector Prince Maurice of Orange, the historical canon of the Revolt acquired Orangist as well as orthodox Calvinist associations.⁸

Stern demonstrates that when the provincial States barred the orphaned son of William II of Orange (1626–1650), Prince William III, from the stadholderate during the First Stadholderless Period (1650–1672),⁹ the new order had 'to pass judgement on

H.W. Blom and I.W. Wildenberg (eds), *Pieter de la Court in zijn tijd (1618–1685). Aspecten van een veelzijdig publicist*, Amsterdam 1986; J. Pollmann, *Het oorlogsverleden van de Gouden Eeuw*, Leiden 2008, p. 6–15; J. Stern, *Orangism in the Dutch Republic in word and image, 1650–1675*, Manchester 2010, p. 160–165; I. Vroomen, 'Taal van de Republiek. Het gebruik van vaderlandretoriek in Nederlandse pamfletten, 1618–1672', doctoral thesis, Rotterdam 2012, <http://repub.eur.nl/res/pub/32307/> (accessed on 8 June 2013), p. 142–158; W. Frijhoff and M. Spies, *1650. Hard-won unity*, Assen 2004, p. 556–557.

5 J. Pollmann, 'No man's land. Reinventing Netherlandish identities, 1585–1621', in: R. Stein and J. Pollmann (eds), *Networks, regions and nations. Shaping identities in the Low Countries, 1300–1650*, Leiden 2010, p. 251–258; J. van der Steen, 'Goed en fout tijdens de Nederlandse Opstand', in: *Holland, Historisch Tijdschrift* 43.2 (2011), p. 82–96.

6 S. Schama, *The embarrassment of riches. An interpretation of Dutch culture in the golden age*, London 1987, p. 86.

7 Ch.H. Parker, *Faith on the margins. Catholics and Catholicism in the Dutch Golden Age*, Cambridge (MA) 2008, p. 1–23; C. Kooi, *Calvinists and Catholics during Holland's Golden Age. Heretics and idolaters*, Cambridge 2012, p. 30–33.

8 C. Lenarduzzi, "'De oude geusen teghen de nieuwe geusen". De dynamiek van het oorlogsverleden ten tijde van het Twaalfjarig Bestand', in: *Holland, Historisch Tijdschrift* 43.2 (2011), p. 65–81; J. van der Steen, 'A contested past. Memory wars during the Twelve Years' Truce (1609–21)', in: E. Kuijpers et al. (eds), *Memory before modernity. Practices of memory in early modern Europe*, Leiden 2013.

9 A stadholder was a provincial governor originally appointed by the sovereign prince but ever since the Revolt formally employed by the state assemblies. The Orange dynasty provided most of the stadholders after the abjuration of the Spanish king Philip II in 1581. See R. Fruin, *Geschiedenis der staatsinstellingen in Nederland tot den val der Republiek*, ed. H.T. Colenbrander, The Hague 1980, p. 218–224.

the practices of the old regime [...]. The “canon” of accepted truths about the national past was changed in order to reflect and emphasise new political realities’.¹⁰ Opponents of the house of Orange, members of what historians call the States Party (also known as supporters of ‘True Freedom’), hence reinterpreted the past rebellion against the Spanish king in their attempts to marginalize the young prince of Orange, William III, and his supporters.¹¹ But spreading an anti-Orangist reading of the past could be quite a challenge. Looking back on the continued references to the past during the disorders and troubles at the time of the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1654), which was lost by the Republic, diplomat and historian Lieuwe van Aitzema explained how clergymen in particular deliberately propagated the dominant Orangist reading of the past. He wrote that Orangist propagandists felt it was necessary:

for reason of State / on the Chair / during meals / in Barges / and on Carts to tell / yes for children to learn at their mother’s knee that a hundred thousand were killed for the sake of religion / that the Duke of Alba had prided himself on killing eighteen thousand [...] And the history of one hundred thousand, and of eighteen thousand put often on the stage / served to move the people to endurance and perseverance. It would well-nigh be idolatry / should one not believe it.¹²

Stern’s argument that the supporters of True Freedom needed to develop an alternative interpretation of the Revolt convinces in many respects, but since she focuses on Orangist rhetoric she has not asked why authors who sympathized with the States Party felt obliged to relate their political ideology to the existing popular historical narratives about the conflict. These were, after all, tainted by Orangist associations and, furthermore, opponents of the Orange dynasty already had a wide repertoire of alternative ways to argue why the Republic did not need the house of Orange. Holland’s history of independence and the Batavian Myth – a fictional story about the proto-Dutch Batavian people who fiercely fought the Roman Empire – both suggested Dutch people disliked over-ambitious princely rulers and that they were historically capable of resisting a foreign tyrant without an Orange prince as stadholder. Anti-Orangist propagandists frequently deployed such alternative frames of reference.¹³

¹⁰ Stern, *Orangism* (n. 4), p. 157.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 157–160; G. van der Plaat calls this reinterpretation of the past an ‘anti-Orange myth’: G. van der Plaat, *Eendracht als opdracht. Lieuwe van Aitzema’s bijdrage aan het publieke debat in de zeventiende-eeuwse Republiek*, Hilversum 2003, p. 164–165; for an overview of the term ‘party’ in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, see D.J. Roorda, *Partij en factie. De oproeren van 1672 in de steden van Holland en Zeeland, een krachtmeting tussen partijen en facties*, Groningen 1978, p. 1–10.

¹² L. van Aitzema, *Saken van Staet, In, ende omtrent de Vereenigde Nederlanden, Beginnende met het Jaer 1645, ende eyndigende met het Jaer 1656*, The Hague 1669, p. 1234: ‘om reden van Staet / op den Stoel / op maeltijden / in Schuyten / en op Wagens te segghen / ja de kinderen met haer pap in te geven dat hondert duysent waren om het geloove omgebracht / dat Duc d’Alba alleen sich hadde geroemt van achten duysent. [...] Ende de historie van hondert duysent, ende achten duysent menighmael op het Toneel ghebracht / heeft ghedient om de gemeente te bewegen tot lijdsaemheydt ende stantvastigheydt. Ende ’t soude bykans een afgoderye zijn / soo men ’t niet gelooff.’; see also Van der Plaat, *Eendracht*, p. 73.

¹³ I. Schöffner, ‘The Batavian Myth during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’, in: J.S. Bromley and E.H. Kossmann (eds), *Britain and the Netherlands. Papers delivered to the fifth Anglo-Dutch historical conference*, vol. v, *Some political mythologies*, The Hague 1975, p. 78–101; an example of Holland’s appropriation of the

The present article will explore 1) why, despite the pro-Orange character of the historical canon of the Revolt, members of the States Party nonetheless used references to the Revolt in support of their political arguments, and 2) how they solved the problems they encountered in doing so. Two cases will be dealt with: firstly, the aftermath of William II's attack on Amsterdam (1650–1651) and, secondly, the political controversy surrounding the Exclusion Act of 1654.

Reinterpreting the Revolt

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 formally ended the Eighty Years' War, and it occasioned a disagreement about the dismissal of troops: now that the war was over, many Holland regents urged a reduction of troops to relieve the tax burden. Other provinces as well as the stadholder Prince William II were less keen on Holland's plan, fearing its implementation might weaken the Republic. The prince and his supporters believed that Dutch people profited from war because the shared enemy had kept the country together.¹⁴ The example of the Twelve Years' Truce, when confessional struggles had brought the country to the verge of civil war, was still fresh in the public memory.¹⁵ To give an example of how memories of the Revolt continued to be used after 1648 to support the anti-peace agenda of Orangists we may turn to printer Jan Pietersz in Haarlem who in 1653 brought on the market a new edition of an old pamphlet: *Useful Comments on the Spanish Council*.¹⁶ It contained the advice allegedly given to the Spanish king Philip II at the end of the sixteenth century by three learned men, Justus Lipsius, Erycius Puteanus and Friar Campanella. As the story goes, they had urged Philip to negotiate a peace with the rebels so that the Dutch could be lulled to sleep. The king would subsequently need only to coordinate a surprise attack to bring the disobedient provinces back under his rule. A 'True Patriot' argued in the preface of the

Batavian past, see H. Grotius, *Tractaet vande ovdtheyt vande Batavische nv Hollandsche republiek*, The Hague 1610, and also E. Kolfin, 'Past imperfect. Political ideals in the unfinished Batavian series for the Town Hall of Amsterdam', in: M. van der Zwaag and R. Cohen Tervaert (eds), *Opstand als opdracht. The Batavian commissions*, Amsterdam 2011, p. 10–19; for the use of Holland's medieval past by supporters of True Freedom, see for instance P. de la Court, *Interest van Holland, ofte gronden van Hollands-Welvaren*, Amsterdam 1662, fol. 6v–7r, p. 188–206; for Holland's pride of independence, see L. Panhuysen, *De Ware Vrijheid. De levens van Johan en Cornelis de Witt*, Amsterdam 2005, p. 86–87.

¹⁴ Frijhoff and Spies, 1650 (n. 4), p. 140; William II considered war as an important source of prestige, see H.H. Rowen, *The Princes of Orange. The Stadholders in the Dutch Republic*, Cambridge 1990, first published in 1988, p. 79–83.

¹⁵ Stern, *Orangism*, p. 165–176.

¹⁶ Anonymous, *Dienstige aenmerkingen op den Spaensen raedt, eertijds door Justus Lipsius [...] gegeven aende koninck van Spaengien, hoe men de Vereenichde Nederlanden alderbest wederom onder zijn gebiedt soude kunnen brengen*, Haarlem 1653, Kn(uttel collection) 7451, see W.P.C. Knuttel (ed.), *Catalogus van de pamflettenverzameling berustende in de Koninklijke Bibliotheek*, vol. 2.2, The Hague 1978; this pamphlet is an edition of a text published in 1617: Anonymous, *Spaenschen raedt, hoemen de vereenichde Nederlanden alderbest wederom sal kunnen brengen onder't ghebiedt van den koninck van Spagnien*, s.l. 1617, Kn. 2458.

1653–edition that the war should be resumed, and he tried to convince his readers by refreshing the memory of the untrustworthiness of the Spanish. Yet, he admitted that not even those of ‘the smallest intellect’ needed much informing about all the obstacles that had led to the foundation of the Republic, indicating the lively memory culture about the Revolt, especially among old people for whom ‘there is not a sweeter pastime [...] / than when they may speak about the old times’.¹⁷

In arguing their case, opponents of Holland’s desire for the dismissal of troops turned to the most important constitutional document of the Republic, the Union of Utrecht (1579), which laid down that the military was a matter not for the individual provinces but for the States General. Holland could thus not simply discharge the military regiments on its own. According to Holland, however, this interpretation of the Union of Utrecht was acceptable only in war time, whereas now that the war was over, doubt had arisen about the Union’s constitutional status. Since there was no central financial administration in the Republic and individual provinces were responsible for paying the troops allocated to them (‘apportionment’), the States of Holland could decide unilaterally to suspend the payments to their regiments, which they did.¹⁸ In reaction to this measure, and citing his oath to uphold the Union, Prince William II arrested six members of the States of Holland who sympathized with the States Party and tried to take by force the most powerful engine behind Holland’s opposition to the prince: the city of Amsterdam. The attack failed as a number of companies lost their way. A courier from Hamburg had seen the troops and notified Amsterdam’s magistrate of the imminent arrival of a large army. The city subsequently locked its gates and could no longer be taken by surprise. A few months after the failed attack, the prince died unexpectedly.¹⁹ Although William II’s only son was born eight days after his father’s death, Holland and the other provinces decided to leave the stadholderly office vacant and not to appoint the young William III, or any other member of the Orange dynasty, as their new stadholder.²⁰

William’s sudden death prompted the States General to convene the Great Assembly of 1651 to find a durable solution for the dismissal of troops and other disagreements about the Union.²¹ Representatives from all provinces of the Republic attended the assembly, which was held in the Great Hall of the Binnenhof (‘Inner Court’) in The Hague. Grand Pensionary Jacob Cats opened the first meeting in January 1651. In a

17 Anonymous, *Dienstige aenmerkingen*, p. 4–5: ‘aldergeringhsten van verstandt’; ‘Daer is geen soeter liefkoserie voor oude luyden / als datse van den ouden tijdt moghen spreecken’.

18 More about ‘apportionment’ or ‘repartitie’, see Fruin, *Geschiedenis der staatsinstellingen* (n. 9), p. 190–191; Rowen, *The Princes of Orange*, p. 84.

19 For the prince’s actions in 1650, see G.W. Kernkamp, *Prins Willem II, 1626–1650*, Amsterdam 1977, first published in 1943, p. 97–146.

20 Friesland employed a different stadholder, William Frederick of Nassau, a cousin of William II. He remained in office in this province and on William II’s death also became stadholder of Groningen and Drenthe.

21 The interest in the Union of Utrecht around 1650 is evidenced by the fact that at least seven editions of the tract were printed in that year alone; Frijhoff and Spies, *1650* (n. 4), p. 77.

speech that was later published, Cats thanked God ‘that this solemn Assembly could be held in a place where formerly [in 1581] the King of Spain was abjured, his yoke thrown off, and the grounds laid for the Liberty of these Lands’.²² It is not inconceivable that the grand pensionary looked up when he continued: ‘where the Trophies and the marks of the Victory granted from time to time by the merciful God to this State, are hanging above everyone’s head’ (fig. 1).²³

To Holland’s satisfaction, the Great Assembly confirmed the sovereignty of the provinces. Yet it did not solve the continuing tensions between provincial autonomy and the delegation of authority to the Union. Already well before the assembly had begun, supporters of True Freedom and Orangist propagandists had fought out a media war.²⁴ In their political arguments in the ‘present’, both parties claimed to act in the spirit of the past Revolt against the Habsburg overlord. The well-known anti-Orangist pamphlet *Holland Talk*, which was published shortly after William II’s attack, considered the actions of the prince as an unacceptable break with the moral legacy of the Revolt. The author for example suggested that William II had treated the cities of Holland ‘as if they were cities of the King of Spain’.²⁵ In the pamphlet, four people from Gelderland, Holland, Friesland and Brabant discuss the prince’s recent coup. Holland decries William II for ‘doing everything to the city [Amsterdam], that an enemy would be able to do’.²⁶ In reaction to the Gelderlander’s accusation that Holland had acted unconstitutionally in the matter of the disbanding of the troops, the Hollander explains that ‘The seven provinces are united / or connected to each other / but it is not a single body / only in matters of war’. He cites the first article of the Union (which, as he points out, gave the Republic its name of ‘United Provinces’ – in the plural) as evidence that the provinces delegated their sovereignty to the States General only because of the war.²⁷ Since the war was over and the basis for such collaboration

22 J. Cats, *Anvanck vande Groote Vergaderinge der Vereenichde Nederlanden*, Leiden 1651, Kn. 7029, fol. 2r: ‘dat dese solemnele Vergaderinge mach werden gehouden in eene plaetse / daer eertijts den Koninck van Spaignen is af gesworen / syn Jock verworpen / en de Gronden vande Vryheyt deser Landen zyn geleyt’.

23 Ibidem: ‘Daer de Trophèen ende Zegel-teecken / vande Victorien by den goedertieren Godt aen desen Staet van tijt tot tijt genadelijck verleent, over yders hoofd [...] zyn swevende’.

24 Several historians have studied this media war, including many of the texts covered by this article. See Van der Plaat, *Eendracht als opdracht* (n. 11), p. 143–173; C. Dingemans, *Rap van tong, scherp van pen. Literaire discussiecultuur in Nederlandse praatjespamfletten (circa 1600–1750)*, Hilversum 2008, p. 99–179; Stern, *Orangism* (n. 4), p. 84–105; R. Harms, *Pamfletten en publieke opinie. Massamedia in de zeventiende eeuw*, Amsterdam 2011, p. 91–127; Vroomen, ‘Taal van de Republiek’ (n. 4), p. 119–163.

25 Anonymous, *Hollants praatjen, tusschen vier personen [...] aangaande de souverainiteyt van syn hoogheyt*, Antwerp 1650, fol. a2r: ‘als of het de Steden van den Koning van Spangien waren’. The author claims he had the text printed in Antwerp in the Southern Netherlands to evade censorship or public censure, but as Clazina Dingemans has shown, this was probably a rhetorical trick to show that the supporters of the prince violated the freedoms of the land so that the author had to turn to Antwerp in the Habsburg Netherlands to express his opinions; Dingemans, *Rap van tong, scherp van pen*, p. 162–163.

26 Anonymous, *Hollants praatjen*, fol. a2r: ‘Hy heeft alles aen de Stadt gedaen / wat een vyand soude konnen doen’.

27 Ibidem, fol. a4r: ‘De seven Provintien zijn wel geunieert / of t’samen verbonden / maer ’t en is geen een lichaem / dan in’t stuck van d’oorloge [...] Men noemtse Seven vereenigde Landen, of Provincien’.



Fig. 1 Bartholomeus van Bassen, The Great Hall of the Inner Court ('Binnenhof') in The Hague during the Great Assembly of the States General of 1651, c. 1651, SK-C-1350, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

had disappeared, Holland had every right to act as it did and was justified even within the confines of the Union.

In response to the Gelderlander's question whether the prince's attack on Amsterdam should really be taken so seriously, the Hollander replies: 'Yes, it is of great significance / that the Old Lord Prince of Orange [...] his Highness' Grandfather, judged / that the Duke of Anjou, then Duke of Brabant / for that reason forfeited his dukedom'.²⁸ Here the Hollander draws a parallel between past and present by highlighting the high-handed attempt of Francis, duke of Anjou, who had been appointed as sovereign by the rebels in 1581 but was given so little power that he became frustrated and tried to seize Antwerp in 1583. As a result, the States General no longer recognized the duke as their sovereign. By evoking this historical example, the author of *Holland Talk* showed that it was not impossible to appropriate the memory of William I while criticizing his grandson William II. To further emphasize that William II acted even more

²⁸ Ibidem, fol. a2v: 'Ja/ daer is so veel aengelegen / dat de Ouden Heere Prince van Oraignien, hooghloff. gedach. Sijn Hoogheys Groot-vader, oordeelde / dat den Hertog van Alençon [i.e. Anjou], doe Hertog van Brabant / om die oorsaek / was vervallen van zijn recht van't Hertogdom'.

despicably than Anjou, the Hollander argues that ‘here there is no Sovereign / but a Stadholder; here there is no Parliament that is called by the Sovereign and / when he pleases / dissolved. Here there are States / who stand in their own right / and who acknowledge no one as a higher lord’.²⁹ Although Anjou had acted reprehensibly, at least he did so as a sovereign. William II was merely a stadholder, which meant his conduct was even more unconstitutional. A similar argument can be found in the *Right Second Part of the Holland Talk*, in which a Brabanter claims that William II surpassed even the duke of Alba in wickedness. The Gelderlander is shocked by this statement: ‘I don’t know how the gentleman from Brabant can substantiate that [claim] / that the Prince could be compared to the duke of Alba, the cruelest Tyrant of the World’. The Brabanter subsequently explains that Alba acted on the orders of his natural lord, Philip II, while William II counteracted the orders of his, the States of Holland.³⁰

The published fictional dialogues between Dutch people from all corners of the Republic demonstrate how authors sought to increase the persuasiveness of their argument by involving people with diverging opinions and then having the author’s opinion prevail – in this case the Hollander’s.³¹ Another good example is the anti-Orangist *The Hague Shoptalk*, published after the death of William II and at the time of the Great Assembly. Four men (a Hollander, a Zeelander, a Frisian and a Groninger) gather in a bookshop in The Hague and discuss the political situation. The Groninger has just entered and asks for news, specifically for tidings from France or England. The Hollander answers that they were not talking about England or France but about ‘the great changes which / now for a year / or a bit more time / occurred in these United Provinces’.³² He thanks God for the positive turn events had taken – William II died at the end of 1650 – and he says ‘I cannot see that for the duration / that we were at war with the King of Spain / we had ever so great a victory / as now a year ago’.³³ The Hollander considers the death of Prince William to be the best thing that has ever happened to the Republic. The Groninger does not quite understand this celebration of the prince’s death and proposes to discuss the matter further.³⁴ After the unsuccessful attack on Amsterdam, the prince and the States had reached an agreement about disbanding the troops. Was it not a bit cruel to celebrate William’s death as a triumph?

29 Ibidem, fol. a3r: ‘hier is geen Souverain, maar een Stadhouder; hier is geen Parlement dat van een Souverain geroepen wert / en / als’t hem belieft / weder moet scheyden. Maer hier sijn Staten, die uyt haer selven bestaen / en die / boven haer / niemant en kennen’.

30 Anonymous, *Het rechte tweede deel, van’t Hollands praatje, verdedigende het recht van de [...] Staten van Hollandt en West-Vrieslandt*, Antwerp 1650, p. 6. :‘Ick weet niet waer dien Brabandschen Heer dat vast soude maken / dat den Prince in vergelijckinge soude komen met Ducq d’Alf, den wreedsten Tyran van de Werelt’.

31 Dingemanse, *Rap van tong* (n. 24), p. 130–139.

32 Anonymous, *Haagsch vinkel-praatje, oft Gesprek, voor-gevallen in den Hage, tusschen vier personen [...] nopende de amnestie, dank, en vier-dag*, Leeuwarden: Claude Fonteyne, 1651, Kn. 7039, p. 3: ‘de groote veranderingen / nu in een jaar / of wat meer tijds / in dese Vereenigde Provincien voor-ghevalen’.

33 Ibidem, p. 4: ‘dat ik niet en kan sien dat wy soo lang / als wy met den Koning van Spaignien in oorloog hebben geweest / oyt soo grooten zegen en victorie gehad hebben / als nu een jaar herwaerts’.

34 Ibidem, p. 4.

The Hollander explains that just before his death, the prince was as bellicose as ever. His death may have been tragic, but ultimately it benefitted the country.³⁵

To prove his point, the Hollander teaches a brief history lesson in which he gives a new spin to existing narratives about the Revolt. He refers to the sixteenth-century past to show that from the greatest evil good things could arise. He recalls a series of events, beginning with the religious persecutions under Philip II. These persecutions violated local privileges, but the positive result was public discontent. Discontent in the 1560s was the prelude to the grand-scale Revolt, which ultimately gave rise to the freedom that people enjoyed 'now'. The next episode in the story of the Hollander is the governorship of the duke of Alba at the end of the 1560s and beginning of the 1570s. The frequent references to his oppressive tribunal, the Council of Troubles, in a variety of media show that by 1650 the duke was still an example capable of evoking strong associations with injustice. But although Alba was perceived as wicked, his regime had strengthened the rebels in their convictions and had motivated them to continue fighting. Then the Hollander arrives at the famous capture of Den Briel by the rebels in 1572. When 'the Queen of England denied entry to the Sea Beggars (as people called them) / since she had peace with the King of Spain; this seemed a very evil sign / but it was the beginning of our deliverance / as the new beggars [...] not knowing where to harbour / came to Den Briel'.³⁶ The capture of Den Briel was the first rebel take-over of a city, and it was followed by other cities siding with the rebels.

The Hollander continues enumerating the canonical episodes of the history of the Revolt, such as the atrocities committed by Spanish soldiers in Rotterdam (1572), Zutphen (1572), Naarden (1572) and Haarlem (1573). In most narratives, authors used these episodes as evidence of the cruel nature of Spanish rulers and to justify the war against Spain.³⁷ The Hollander looks at it from a more positive perspective. When they were besieged in 1573-1574, inhabitants of the cities of Alkmaar and Leiden knew about the cruelties committed in other towns and were so horrified by them that they refused to surrender and were willing to fight until the very end. This proved to be the best strategy, and both cities fought off the Spanish army. The Hollander ends with the murder of William of Orange by Balthasar Gérard in 1584: 'Then everyone thought the Land was lost; but it was a great blessing for the Land'.³⁸ In 1584, the States of Holland had intended to make the prince count of Holland 'as a result of which we would

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 4-5.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 15: 'de Koninginne van Engeland de Water-geusen (soo men die noemde) haer land ontseyd / alsoo sy met den Koning van Spaignien vrede had; 't welk een seer quaat teyken scheen te zijn / en 't was 't begin van onse verlossing / alsoo die nieuwe geusen [...] niet wetende waer sy souden havenen / in den Briel quamen'.

³⁷ See for instance the history of the Revolt *Spiegel der Ievghit* (1614) which was republished throughout the seventeenth century; W. Cilleßen, 'Der Spiegel der Jeugd. Ein Kinderbuch als Medium der Geschichtserinnerung in den Niederlanden (1614-1813)', in: H. Peterse (ed.), *Süß scheint der Krieg den Unerfahrenen. Das Bild vom Krieg und die Utopie des Friedens in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Göttingen 2004, p. 60-62.

³⁸ Anonymous, *Haagsch vvinckel-praatje*, p. 15: 'Doe meende elk dat het Land verlooren was; en het was een groote zegen voor 't Land'.

have changed Lord / but not condition / as we would not have been better off with Orange than with Spain: so his death brings us more good / than evil'.³⁹

Memory politics and the Exclusion

The analysis of a number of important texts published in 1650–1651 and written by adherents of True Freedom has revealed that States Party propagandists apparently considered it useful to refer to the Revolt in their political texts, even though this required a constant and sometimes laborious reinterpretation of the dominant historical canon.⁴⁰ To further illustrate the difficulty of using references to the Revolt while casting off the dominant Orangist interpretation of the past, it is worthwhile to look at the Exclusion Act, a secret agreement between Stadholderless Holland and Commonwealth England that was part of the treaty that ended the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1654): the Treaty of Westminster. In signing the Exclusion Act, Holland succumbed to pressures from England's Protector Oliver Cromwell never to appoint the son of William II as stadholder. Cromwell's demand was informed by the fact that the young prince of Orange was a nephew of the exiled king Charles II. Should this William III become stadholder of the powerful Dutch Republic, he might eventually help restore his uncle as king of England. Holland had signed the secret clause without consulting the States General, thereby angering Orangists at home and in the other provinces of the Republic.⁴¹ The States of Friesland, for instance, complained at the States General about this act which they felt slighted the descendant of 'the lord Prince William the Elder [...] whose bones are with us in Delft buried beneath a tomb, in his honour and in his eternal memory, erected by the State itself'.⁴² By mentioning a physical reminder of William of Orange, namely his tomb, the States of Friesland sought to convince the delegates in the States General of the gratitude that was owed to the Orange dynasty. Excluding the current prince of Orange from public office was, they felt, the worst kind of ingratitude.

39 Ibidem, p. 15: 'daer door wy wel van Heer souden verandert hebben / maer niet van Conditie / alsoo wy geen beter souden gehad hebben aen Oraignien, als aan Spaignien: soo dat die dood ons meer goed / als quaat dede'.

40 For other examples of this challenge, see anonymous, *I. Conferentie, van eenige Nederlandsche heeren, op den tegenwoordigen staet deser landen*, Middelburg 1651, Kn. 6899, fol. a2v, c1r; anonymous, *Openhartig discours, tusschen een Hollander, een Zeeuw, een Vries, ende een Over-ysselaar, rakende de subite dood van sijn hoogheyd prins VVilhelm*, Rotterdam 1651, Kn. 7040, fol. a2r–v.

41 G. de Bruin, 'Political pamphleteering and public opinion', in: F. Deen et al. (eds), *Pamphlets and politics in the Dutch Republic*, Leiden 2011, p. 81.

42 Cited in L. van Aitzema, *Historie of Verhael van Saken van staet en Oorlogh, in, ende ontrent de Vereenigde Nederlanden, beginnende met 't uytgaen vanden Treves*, The Hague 1663, p. 110: 'De Heer Prins Willem de Oude [...] wiens Beenderen noch by ons tot Delft, onder een Graft t'sijner eeren, ende tot een eeuwighe Memorie bij den Staet self gedaen maecken [...] begraven leggen'.

Most Orangist publications of the period argued that gratitude was owed to the Orange dynasty.⁴³ To give one other example, during the Exclusion controversy in 1654 poet Johannes Beuken wrote a poem in honour of the house of Orange-Nassau, and he dedicated it to the Magistrate of the city of Leiden. In his dedication he wrote: ‘What Netherlander is not most highly obliged to the serene House of Nassau? That House to which we owe, apart from God, our freedom’.⁴⁴ Here the author referred to the Revolt and in particular to William of Orange’s role in the rebellion. By successfully fighting off the Spanish king from 1566 onwards, the rebels (led by Orange) had laid the first stone of a new state: the Dutch Republic. After exhorting his readers to praise the house of Orange, Beuken gave a poetic account of important sieges, battles and other events from the beginning of the Revolt in 1566 to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and beyond. The author claimed that what had happened during the war against Spain was ‘known to virtually all’. Yet, he advised anyone ‘who does not know, [to] read Emanuel van Meteren and other memoirists’.⁴⁵ Furthermore, for the readers who were less familiar with the historical narrative, Beuken clarified names and dates in explanatory footnotes.⁴⁶

Due to the widespread criticism of the Exclusion, notably by Zeeland and Friesland, Holland’s grand pensionary Johan de Witt wrote a defence of this measure: the *Deduction*. The English ambassador in The Hague observed that the text was ‘as big as half the bible’ and although this was an exaggeration, it took the grand pensionary five hours to deliver his *Deduction* on 6 August 1654 in the assembly of the States General.⁴⁷ In it, De Witt argued that political power should not be a birth right and that the monarchical presence of the princes of Orange as stadholders was incompatible with the state’s republican constitution. These were fundamental principles, yet De Witt used historical precedents, especially the Revolt, to argue more convincingly why Holland was justified in denying the young Prince William III the right to succeed as stadholder. He posed the rhetorical question: ‘has not the most important matter that has occurred in these Netherlands in people’s remembrance or the memory of histories taught us

43 See also Van de Klashorst, “‘Metten schijn’” (n. 4), p. 100; Stern, *Orangism* (n. 4), p. 68–74, 160–161.

44 J. Beuken, ‘Orangiens en Nassouwse Louwer-krans’, in: *Rijmen, verdeeld in Drie Boekken, als 1. minnedichten. 2. veelderley. 3. Bybel-werk*, Leiden 1668, fol. 11r: ‘wat Nederlanders is niet ten hoogsten verplicht aan dat doorluchtige Huys van Nassouw? dat Huys aan wien wy (naast God) onse Vryheyd schuldig zijn’.

45 *Ibidem*, fol. 19r: ‘is yder by na bekend. Die het niet en weet, lese Emanuel van Métre en andre Gedenk-Schrijvers’; Emanuel van Meteren (1535–1612) was an influential historian of the Revolt.

46 The widespread Orangist appeals to the Revolt to exhort people to feel gratitude towards the house of Orange are well-evidenced and include: anonymous, *Bedenckingen | op de deductie van de [...] Staten van Hollandt, noopende den artijckel van seclusie, van den heere prince van Oragnien*, z.p. 1654, Kn. 7551, p. 8, 27–29; anonymous, *Coppe | van de onkosten, gedaen by Willem [...] van Orangnien, in’t vverven van twee heyr-legers, te weten, van’t iaer 1568. ende 1572. om te thoonen de abuysen begaen in de laetsten gheemaneerde deductie, uyt-gegeven by de [...] Staten van Hollandt*, Amsterdam 1654, Kn. 7553; States of Zeeland, *Copia van de resolutie ende motiven der [...] Staten van Zeelandt, teghens d’acte van seclusie, by de welke de provincie van Hollandt den [...] prince van Orangien [...] hebben uyt-ghesloten*, 1654, Kn. 7554, fol. a3v–a4r.

47 Th. Birch (ed.), *A collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe*, vol. II, London 1742, p. 497; H.H. Rowen, *John de Witt, grand pensionary of Holland, 1625–1672*, Princeton (NJ) 1978, p. 235.

that such a negative resolution and engagement is sometimes necessary?'⁴⁸ The 'negative resolution' De Witt referred to was the States of Holland's decision in April 1581 to abjure the king, Philip II of Spain, a decision that the States General had adopted in their Oath of Abjuration a few months later. By likening the Abjuration of 1581 to the Exclusion of 1654, De Witt reinterpreted a canonical episode in the history of the Revolt and cleverly disentangled the abjuration of Philip II from the Orangist associations the event had acquired over time. The references to the Revolt in the *Deductie*, as well as the fact that the tract was publically recited in the highest political assembly of the Republic, demonstrate that De Witt recognized the political potency and canonical status of narratives about the past rebellion against Philip II.

The Union of Utrecht (1579), as has been explained above, was an object of contested interpretations because of its constitutional importance. De Witt and the States of Holland argued that the Union confirmed the independence of the confederated provinces, whereas the other provinces claimed that by accepting the Act of Exclusion, Holland had exceeded the Union's constitutional bounds. De Witt also used less constitutionally relevant references to the Revolt to show that Holland's acquiescence in the Exclusion was lawful. He asserted, for instance, that it was not the Exclusion Act that had caused disunity within the Republic – as some provinces claimed – but that 'the Netherlands were foremost brought into a state of discord by the Heads', i.e. princes.⁴⁹ De Witt drew from the sixteenth-century past to substantiate this assertion. He briefly touched upon 'the old histories and chronicles', which 'nowadays still show us with fright in what ways our ancestors have lived under the Dukes / Counts / Bishops / and Lords in continuous dissension and disagreement'.⁵⁰ Evoking the public memory of Burgundian and Habsburg rulers, with particular attention to the persecution of heretics by Emperor Charles V and King Philip II, the author arrived at 'those times / which are actually applicable to these': the period of the 1580s when according to De Witt all domestic troubles were caused not by the many threats of war but by the Dutch princely rulers themselves.⁵¹ The Anjou debacle, mentioned above, was an episode supporters of True Freedom referred to in order to prove that in the past it had always been ambitious rulers who jeopardized the peace of the land. Similarly, after Anjou, Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, was appointed governor, and he, too, refused

48 J. de Witt, *Deductie, ofte declaratie van de Staten van Hollandt ende West-Vrieslandt [...] tot justitatie van't verleen van seeckere acte van seclusie, raeckende 't employ vanden heere prince van Oraigne [...] op den vierden mey 1654 ghepasseert*, The Hague 1654, p. 14: 'heeft niet de alderimporteniste saecke die / by de Menschen memorie / ofte geheuchenisse van historiën / in dese Nederlanden voorgevallen is ons gheleert dat soodanige negatieve resolutie ende verbintenissen somwijlen nootsaeckelijck is?'

49 Ibidem, p. 59: 'dat de Nederlanden meest in oneenigheyt zijn ghebracht door de Hoofden'.

50 Ibidem, p. 61–62: 'De oude Historien / ende Chronijcquen doen ons noch huyden 's daechs met verschrickinghe sien in wat voeghen ons Voor-ouderen onder Hertoghen / Graven / Bisschoppen / ende Heeren / niet alleen in continuele dissentien / ende oneenicheden hebben geleeft'.

51 Ibidem, p. 62: 'die tijden / die in desen eyghentlijck zijn applicabel'.

to settle for the power conferred on him by the States General and instead tried to centralize his authority at the expense of local privileges.⁵²

Inasmuch as the malgovernance of over-ambitious princely rulers could torment a country, De Witt explained, the death of such a ruler could be a great cause for relief. Just as William II's death had been a blessing in disguise, the death of William of Orange should not be seen as a tragedy according to the grand pensionary. In 1584, the States of Holland had intended to grant Prince William I the sovereignty of the province. But while they were drafting this proposal, Balthasar Gérard – a Catholic zealot from the Franche-Comté – assassinated the prince. De Witt looked back: 'Look / a dishonourable and Godless Murderer was conceived who / being bribed by the Enemies of the Land / took the life of that glorious Prince'.⁵³ The grand pensionary condemned the murder but added that despite the fact that the country was robbed of its leader, 'God Almighty has nonetheless created light from such deep darkness / and not only kept the State standing / but also preserved its Inhabitants / and guarded them from the new subjection they were already being rushed into'.⁵⁴ Here, De Witt attributed the success of the Revolt to divine intervention in order to downplay the role that Orangists ascribed to William of Orange.

Finally, De Witt argued that William of Orange's descendants Maurice, Frederick Henry and William II were 'honoured / as if they had been lawful Princes of the Land'.⁵⁵ Considering that, formally, in the Dutch Republic they had never been more than stadholders, the princes of Orange claimed more respect than they were entitled to. He addressed 'the sensitive reproof / and emotional reproach of ingratitude / and underestimation towards the mentioned House of Orange' and rejected the argument that gratitude towards the prince of Orange and his forefathers is incompatible with the Exclusion.⁵⁶ He probably used the words 'sensitive' and 'emotional' in acknowledgement of the emotions that the past could stir up. For this reason indeed it seems De Witt felt compelled to add the disclaimer that although Maurice, Frederick Henry and William II deserved to be criticized, the States of Holland 'nevertheless have to confess that the Lord Prince William the Old / great-grandfather of the present Prince of Orange deserves to be considered differently'.⁵⁷ He challenged the States of Friesland's

52 Ibidem, p. 63.

53 Ibidem, p. 50: 'Siet / daer werdt een eer- ende Godtloos Moordenaer verweckt die / van 's Landts Vyanden omgekocht wesende / dien glorieusen Prince het leven berooft'.

54 Ibidem, p. 50: 'soo heeft nochtans Godt Almachtich uyt soo dicke duysternisse een helder licht gheschept / ende niet alleenlijck den Staedt genadichlijck ende wonderbaerlijck staende ghehouden / maer oock d'Ingesetenen van dien ghepreserveert / ende behoedt voor de nieuwe subjectie daer inne de selve albereyts genoetsaem waren geprecipiteert'.

55 Ibidem, p. 73: 'ghe-eert / even als of sy wettighe Princen van den Lande waren gheweest'.

56 Ibidem, p. 71: 'het sensibel verwijt / ende de ghevoelijke reproche van ondanckbaerheydt / ende mes-cognaissance teghens 'tgemelte Huys van Oraigne'.

57 Ibidem, p. 74: 'Soo moeten haer Ed: Groot Mo: nochtans bekennen dat / ten regarde dat den Heere Prince Willem d'oude / over-Groot-Vader van den jegenwoordigen Prince van Oraigne / andere consideratie zijn vallende'.

accusation of ingratitude and asked what they had done when William I died. In 1584, they had refused to employ the prince's son Maurice as stadholder, instead granting the stadholderate to William of Orange's nephew, William Louis. De Witt jeered: 'where, at that time, were those who now write and go on so much about due gratitude?'⁵⁸

The *Deduction* is only one example of the States Party's frequent use of references to the Revolt and of the strategies they employed to disconnect narratives about the conflict from pro-Orange associations. In many other publications, adherents of True Freedom made similar efforts.⁵⁹

Conclusion

This article has analyzed discussions about the past but in full awareness that these discussions do not by themselves change the course of history; political arguments and rhetoric need to be followed by 'real' actions in order to make a lasting impact on society. A remark of the English Ambassador in The Hague, John Thurloe, illustrates the importance of the political context for the success of having one's interpretation of events accepted by others. He observed in 1654, just after the publication of Johan de Witt's *Deduction*, that:

There are some, who do prognosticate to Holland some harm from this apology [i.e. the *Deduction*]; as in like manner in the year 1617, when [Olden]Barnevelt published his apology;⁶⁰ exposing himself at that time to the assaults and insulting pens of so many famous writers, who writ against him.

But the states of Holland have supporters, which Barneveltd had not; for Barneveltd and the states of Holland were not masters of the militia, as the states of Holland are at present. Secondly, those of Holland are and will be back'd and assisted by England.⁶¹

Past experience taught Dutch people that a conflict with a prince of Orange was risky. Oldenbarnevelt had, after all, lost his head over a conflict with Prince Maurice. However, the political context had changed radically from 1617 onwards: the relatively powerful stadholderate in the period 1617-1650 had been replaced by the stadholderless

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 74: 'Waer waren als doen die gene die nu soo veel van schuldige danckbaerheydt schrijven ende vrijven?'

⁵⁹ See for example the following succinct booklets: anonymous, *Zeeuwze ratel, geroert tusschen dry personen, een Hollander, Zeeuww en Hagenaar, over het uitsluiten en deporteren van een stadhouder en generaal*, Middelburg 1654, Kn. 7564; anonymous, *Noodig bericht aan alle oprechte patriotten [...] nopende, dat den prince van Oranjen, noch de grave van Nassouw [...] geen oorsaak zijn tot ons aller behoudenis*, Amsterdam 1654, Kn. 7567; anonymous, *Wederlegginge vande valsche verkeerde rekeninge en kalkulatie, onlangs in druck uytgekomen, aengaende de pretense-onkosten die gedaen souden wesen by Willem de 1, s.l. 1655*, Kn. 7662.

⁶⁰ Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547-1619) had been Advocate of Holland, a similar office to the one held by Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt. Oldenbarnevelt, like De Witt, came into conflict with the house of Orange.

⁶¹ Birch (ed.), *A collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe* (n. 47), vol. II, p. 496.

regime examined in this article. By the 1650s it had become less dangerous to criticize the Orange dynasty in the present and trivialize its achievements in the past.

Yet, despite these political changes, the dominant Orangist narrative about the Revolt was remarkably resilient and grew even stronger as supporters of the house of Orange became more outspoken in their propaganda. In 1662, when discussions about the stadholderate reached a high point, Pieter de la Court noted the continued difficulty supporters of True Freedom experienced in trying to circumvent the Orangist frame of history.⁶² An adherent of the States Party, he wrote the preface to an edition of the history of the Dutch Revolt by Viglius van Aytta (1507-1577). Viglius had been a member of the Council of State, an important counsellor to Philip II of Spain when the Revolt broke out, and an outspoken critic of the leader of the Revolt William I of Orange. Prince William and his supporters, De la Court alleged, ultimately won the war and this meant:

that in narrating the history of the troubles, our historiographers as subjects of the Princes, put on the stage their brave deeds and exaggerated them, concealing in the meantime, and trivialising as much as possible, their vices and follies.⁶³

The same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the Habsburg Southern Netherlands. De la Court argued that South-Netherlandish historians were driven by motives similar to those of their Northern colleagues, and that ‘in describing the troubles, [they] trivialise the vices and follies of the King of Spain, in order to be able to blame the troubles on the Netherlandish nobles, and particularly on the Princes of Orange’.⁶⁴ De la Court attributed Prince William’s heroic reputation in the Republic not so much to his exceptional skill and courage as to the outcome of the war: the separation between the Northern and Southern Netherlands. Interestingly, De la Court toned down William of Orange’s glorious war record by presenting the prince’s heroic reputation as simply the result of political and military circumstances outside his control. Without risking accusation of a lack of patriotism, De la Court could thus justify the stadholderless political system that he envisaged.⁶⁵

Although De la Court’s perspective appears distinctly modern to readers in the twenty-first century, his relativistic approach to the past would probably not have appealed to the average early modern inhabitant of the Republic. Above all, his

⁶² Stern, *Orangism* (n. 4), p. 159.

⁶³ P. de la Court, ‘Voor-reden’ to Viglius van Aytta, ‘Grondig berigt van ’t Nederlands oproer zo onder de hertogin van Parma, als den hertog van Alba. Beschreven in ’t François’, in: P. de la Court (ed.), *Historie der gravelike regering in Holland*, z.p. 1662, p. 209: ‘dat Onse Historie-Schrijvers als onderdaanen der selver, in het verhaalen der gemelde Troubelen, alle de kloeke daaden der Princen op het tooneel bragten, ende die booven de waarheid vergrooteden, verswijgende onderentusschen ofte verkleinende soo veel doenelik, der selven ondeugden ende dwaasheden’.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 209-210: ‘in het beschrijven der gemelde Troublen [...] de ondeugden ende dwaasheden der Koningen van Hispanien verzwijgen ofte verkleinen, om alle den schuld der zelve Troublen, ten laste de Nederlandse Heeren, en bysonderlijk op de Princen van Oranjen te kunnen leggen’.

⁶⁵ See also Geyl, ‘Het stadhouderschap’ (n. 4), p. 12.

explanation further demonstrates that every time anti-Orangist political activists deployed the Revolt in support of their agenda, they first needed to address the Orangist slant of most historical narratives about the conflict.

This article has shown that propagandists of the States Party could not easily disentangle themselves from the Orangist narrative. There are two important explanations for the use of historical references to the Revolt by supporters of True Freedom. In the first place, the historical canon was recognized by many people as the foundation narrative of the Republic. In that capacity it was an important frame of reference that adherents of the States Party were unable to ignore in discussions about the Republic's legal constitution in the 1650s and 60s. The problem, however, was that supporters of the house of Orange had in the preceding decades successfully claimed the legacy of the Revolt as their moral property. As a result, recognition of William of Orange's achievements became difficult to reconcile with denying the stadholderate to the prince's great-grandson William III.

Secondly, a polemicist who appropriated the popular historical frame of reference about the Revolt effectively compelled the opposition to do the same. Orangists accused the States Party of ingratitude and a lack of patriotism. The only way to counter these accusations – and this is also an explanation of how the States Party circumvented the Orangist slant of the dominant narrative – was to challenge the Orangist interpretation of the past and replace it with an anti-Orangist alternative. The existence of a popular and dominant interpretation of the past – in this case notably the celebration of William I of Orange as a national hero – did not preclude the existence of other interpretations, but it did force people with alternative interpretations to position themselves against the canon, compelling them constantly to debunk their opponent's reading of the past.