

Alejandro Farnesio y Francisco Verdugo: la Guerra en el Noreste*.

Alexander Farnese and Francisco Verdugo: the War in the North East.

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Resumen: Los comentarios del coronel español Francisco Verdugo reflejan su posición precaria como gobernador de las posesiones reales en el noreste de los Países Bajos entre 1581 y 1594. Se consideraba al coronel responsable de la pérdida de la mayor parte de su territorio en la guerra contra el príncipe Maurits de Nassau, y los comentarios constituyen la defensa de sus acciones. No nos encontramos ante la historia de Alejandro Farnesio y sus victorias en Brabante y Flandes, pero ante el fracaso de Farnesio en la ayuda de su gobernador en el noreste de los Países Bajos

Palabras Clave: Las Guerras de Flandes, Francisco Verdugo, Alejandro Farnesio, Historia Militar, Siglo XVI, Documentos de ego.

Abstract: The comments of Spanish colonel Francisco Verdugo reflect his difficult position as governor of the royal possessions in the North East of the Low Countries between 1581 and 1594. The colonel was held responsible for the loss of most of his territory in the war against prince Maurits of Nassau, and the Comments constitute the defence of his actions. Here we encounter not the dominant history of Alexander Farnese and his victories in Brabant and Flanders, but the failure of Farnese to support his governor in the North East of the Low Countries.

Keywords: The Dutch Revolt, Francisco Verdugo, Alexander Farnese, Military History, 16th century, Ego Document

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History is written by the victorious. The trumpets of victory resonate much louder than the voices of the defeated. However, these defeated do deserve their place in history, and as such, in modern historical research. The written accounts of defeat often include excuses for the failure. In between the lines we continually read the same message: 'It was not my fault'. These texts are all about who is to blame for the defeat, and what. For the period of the Dutch Revolt¹, there may not be a stronger example of this 'voice of the defeated' than the Comments of the Spanish colonel Francisco Verdugo on his own actions in the Low Countries, written almost immediately after his final struggles in the north. As governor of the royal possessions in the North East of the Low Countries between 1581 and 1594, Verdugo started off with a long list of victorious enterprises, but in the end the attacks of the rebel forces under prince Maurits of Nassau² led to the evacuation of most of the North East by the royal troops. The colonel was held responsible for this course of events, and the Comments constitute his defence.

These Comments were first published in an Italian translation in 1605 and only after five years, the original Spanish text appeared in print, prepared and edited by Alfonso Velázquez de Velasco, an old friend of Verdugo.³ After these two contemporary editions, another two new editions were published during the nineteenth century. The first of these appeared in 1872 in the 'Colección de libros españoles raros ó curiosos' while in 1899 the Commission royale d'histoire of Belgium published another version.⁴ I shall make use of the latter in my text. This edition also used a manuscript preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris⁵ together with the chronicle of Alonso Vázquez. This last work is still preserved as a manuscript in the Biblioteca Nacional of Madrid, but has been published between 1878-1880 in the famous series of the 'Documentos Inéditos para la Historia de España'.⁶ Lonchay, the editor of the 1899 edition, compared the Paris manuscript and the chronicle by Vázquez, who had made use of Verdugo, with the 1610 edition, and came to the conclusion that there were clear differences to be found. It seems that some sentences had been omitted by the editor, Alfonso Velázquez de Velasco. In the words of Lonchay:

¹ 't Hart 2014; Fagel 2017.

² Van Nimwegen 2011, pp. 154-161..

³ *Li commentari di Francesco Verdugo delle cose sucece in Frisia nel tempo che egli fu governatore et capitan general in quella provincia*, Naples, 1605 [henceforth *Li commentari* 1605]; *Commentario del coronel Francisco Verdugo de la guerra de Frisa, en XIII años que fue governador y capitan general de aquel estado y exercito por el Rey D. Phelippe II, N.S., sacado á luz por D. Alfonso Velazquez de Velasco*, Naples, 1610 [henceforth *Commentario* 1610].

⁴ *Comentario del coronel Francisco Verdugo* 1872; *Commentario del coronel Francisco Verdugo* 1899. There also exists an unpublished Dutch translation: Verdugo 1967, and a very good Dutch translation by Jan van den Broek, with an admirable and lengthy introduction: Verdugo 2009.

⁵ Ochoa 1844; Gachard 1875-1877, I, p. 226; Morel-Fatio 1892, p. 79, nr. 187. Afterwards, two other manuscripts have been located, in Madrid and Berlin: "Comentarios de la guerra de Frisia de Berdugo", Biblioteca Nacional Ms. 17.766; "Memoria de lo sucedido en Frisia mientras el coronel Francisco Verdugo ha estado en ella", mentioned in Huisman 1899, p. 382; Rumeu de Armas 1960, p. 103.

⁶ Vázquez 1878-1880. Vázquez made use of a manuscript of Verdugo's comments. Other authors that have used his information on the North East are Carlos Coloma and Famiano Strada: Coloma 1625 (Coloma 1627); Strada 1647.

“Ce sont les passages où Verdugo rappelle les motifs qu’il eut de se plaindre d’Alexandre Farnèse. Velasquez, qui estimait par-dessus tout dans le travail de son ami, le récit des événements militaires, supprima ces allusions personnelles qu’il trouvait, sans doute, peu intéressantes, depuis que Verdugo était mort, et peut-être fâcheuses pour la mémoire de Farnèse. Mais pour nous, qui n’avons plus de raison de ménager les contemporains de Philippe II, ces critiques ont une grande valeur: elles jettent un jour nouveau sur la cour de Bruxelles en nous révélant les intrigues dont eut à souffrir un des plus fidèles lieutenants du duc de Parme”.

These Comments can therefore be used as a different way of looking at the royal government in Brussels. It is the vision of a Spanish military official who has obvious reasons not to hide his negative comments. He wants to explain his failure, not sparing anyone in the process. At the same time, Verdugo’s text shows us all the problems the royal government and army encountered in the North East of the Low Countries. Thus we encounter a different perspective: not the dominant history of Farnese and his victories in Brabant, Flanders, and elsewhere, but the often forgotten stories of the far north. However, before looking into the Comments, it is important to give a short overview of the life and career of this particular Spanish soldier fighting the Dutch rebels. The Comments constitute a very personal piece of evidence and therefore the background of Verdugo clearly has to be taken into account. Both elements mentioned above, the personal character of the text, and the general focus on the more important southern provinces, might have been the main reasons why Léon Van der Essen has made little use of Verdugo in his impressive study on Farnese.⁷ In his second volume he cites Verdugo twice indirectly by way of Gachard⁸ and only in the last volume on the period from 1585 we find more references to the colonel, but only on nine different pages.⁹

An unusual career

A definitive biography of Francisco Verdugo still remains to be written. Apart from the introductions to the two nineteenth-century editions of his work, there are some studies of his life by Spanish historians¹⁰ and even a small seventeenth-century biography of the colonel.¹¹ Although we have access to a not inconsiderable collection of letters and other documents related to Verdugo through these works, Rumeu de Armas affirms that much more still can be found in the archives. Nevertheless, we possess enough knowledge of his life to present a reliable short overview of his career and related personal life. Verdugo was born in 1531¹² in Talavera de la Reina (Toledo), as the son of a lawyer. Geoffrey Parker characterised him as follows: “career-soldiers from the gentry class like Julián Romero, Cristóbal de Mondragón or Francisco de

⁷ Van der Essen 1933-1937.

⁸ Gachard 1875-1877, I, p. 227.

⁹ He uses the edition by Lonchay. However, of the Spanish authors, Van der Essen makes much more use of Alonso Vázquez, Antonio Carnero, Carlos Coloma, and Martín Antonio del Río, and most references in his work are to the anonymous author of the unpublished “Libro de las cosas de Flandes”, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

¹⁰ Rodríguez Villa 1890; Aragonés de la Encarnación 1934-1935; Rumeu de Armas 1960.

¹¹ Johannes Brouwer made a Dutch translation of this short biography: Brouwer 1933, pp. 376-407; Verdugo 2009.

¹² In earlier works, 1537 was used as his year of birth, but Rumeu de Armas 1960, p. 87, places his birth in 1531.

Verdugo". As the story has it, he was recruited in 1557, luckily just in time to play a small role as a soldier in the famous victory over the French at Saint-Quentin in the same year.¹³

Shortly afterwards, Verdugo entered the personal service of count Peter Ernst of Mansfeld, governor of the province of Luxembourg, and also one of the heroes of Saint-Quentin.¹⁴ This marked a turning point. From now on, his career would not be bound up with the Spanish *tercios*¹⁵, but with the court of the count in Luxembourg. As a member of Mansfeld's retinue, he travelled to Spain in 1565 in order to bring Mary of Portugal back to the Low Countries, where she was to become the bride of Alexander Farnese. He is also said to have accompanied the sons of the count to a meeting in Breda, where the Netherlandish nobles had congregated to complain about the Spanish domination. According to the seventeenth-century biographer of Verdugo, he even entered into debate with these noblemen.¹⁶ If this story is true, we might imagine Verdugo defending the royalist cause in the palace of William of Orange in Breda, in 1566 or early 1567. Eventually, in 1578 Verdugo would marry Dorothea Mansfeld, the natural daughter of Count Peter Ernst, born in 1560 out of a relationship with a woman from Brussels. The marriage would take place in Arlon.¹⁷

After the peace of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559, most of the Spanish soldiers left the Low Countries, but some remained, as did Verdugo and Cristóbal de Mondragón who served as governor of Damvillers in Luxembourg.¹⁸ Verdugo returned to arms in December 1566, when Margaret of Parma had him installed as captain of a regiment of Walloon infantry. The seventeenth-century biography tells us how he was sent to control the Protestants near Antwerp, where he violently stopped the preaching. The text says this gave Margaret *notable contento*.¹⁹ We might also imagine Verdugo present with his troops in Antwerp as part of the royal forces, twelve units (*banderas*) of Walloons under Count Mansfeld, who entered the city at the end of April 1567.²⁰ With the arrival of the Duke of Alba and his Spanish *tercios*, Verdugo continued as captain of a unit of Walloon troops, serving under Colonel Cristóbal de Mondragón. With Mondragón he also served in the fleet that took Anne of Austria from the Low Countries to Spain, in order to be married to Philip II. Again, the Count of Mansfeld was the leader of the expedition. This time, Verdugo could even visit his home town of Talavera during his stay. When he returned to the Low Countries, the war had started.²¹

At first he stayed for some time in garrison in Deventer. Then, on recommendation of Mondragón, Alba made him sergeant-major of the army besieging the Dutch city of Haarlem; after the victory Verdugo became the new military governor of the city. In 1573 he was also made a colonel and he even became the admiral of the

¹³ Parker 1972, p. 118. Fagel 2009a, 2009b, p. 150, and Fagel 2011. Rumeu de Armas 1960, pp. 86-88, uses the "expedientes de pruebas de las Ordenes de Caballería" of Verdugo's son and two grandsons, but in these sources the noble descent can sometimes be overaccentuated.

¹⁴ Mousset and De Jonge 2007.

¹⁵ Rodríguez Hernández 2015.

¹⁶ Rodríguez Villa 1890, pp. 15-16. There was a meeting in Orange's palace in Breda in March 1566, and another in January 1567. Parker 1977, pp. 69-70, 97.

¹⁷ Rumeu de Armas 1960, pp. 94-95.

¹⁸ Salcedo Ruíz 1905.

¹⁹ Rodríguez Villa 1890, p. 18.

²⁰ Marnef 1996, p. 151.

²¹ Rumeu de Armas 1960, pp. 89-90; Cotereau 1881, p. 574.

royal fleet in Holland, as a successor to the unfortunate Count of Boussu, imprisoned by the rebels. A few years later he received his reward, a large pension for life drawn on the Kingdom of Naples.²² The personal career of Verdugo clearly took off as a result of the troubles in the years after the iconoclasm. In Mondragón and Mansfeld he found his most important protectors, and – most probably – through them he connected to a wider network including the highest reaches of the Brussels court. He indeed seems to have had the support of Margaret of Parma, of the Duke of Alba and of Requesens who succeeded in getting a pension for him from Philip II. The related letter to Philip was, of course, full of praise. Especially the fact that he had succeeded in preventing mutiny was highlighted. According to Lonchay, the letters between Verdugo and Requesens show a great affection.²³ In Haarlem, the successful military leader started a relationship with Esther Vandeyck, the daughter of a burgher from Mechelen and a woman from Haarlem. Her father worked as commissioner of provisions in Haarlem. Out of this relation, his son Guillermo was born, who would much later also become a famous military leader and even a knight of the Order of Santiago.²⁴

In 1576, Verdugo was present at the sack of Antwerp and he is said to have taken the Count of Egmont prisoner, the son of the executed Count Lamoraal. After abandoning Haarlem, together with Esther's family, Verdugo was made governor of Breda in January 1577. He now headed a military force of German soldiers. Shortly thereafter, with the pacification of Ghent, all Spanish troops were to leave the Low Countries, and his position was handed over to the Duke of Aarschot. The Spaniards however, remained in Namur and Luxembourg, and Verdugo became the governor of Thionville in his well known Luxembourg, again with Walloon troops under his command.²⁵ In 1577, Verdugo and Mondragón were among the first Spaniards to come to the aid of Juan of Austria and together with the newly arrived Duke of Parma and his troops, they participated in the famous battle of Gembloux on January 31, 1578. Verdugo played an important part in the victory and was made governor of Namur afterwards. Rumeu de Armas informs us that the father of Esther was made commissioner of provisions of this last city. Both Verdugo and Vandeyck were also present again at the siege of Maastricht. However, in an attempt to find more general support in the Low Countries, Parma decided that as a foreigner, Verdugo had to leave his regiments and hand them over to somebody from the Low Countries, in this case Octavio of Mansfeld, son of the Count of Mansfeld.²⁶ The Spanish army left the Low Countries for Italy.

By that time, Octavio, whom he knew from before the war, was already his brother in law, as in 1578 he had married Dorothea, the natural daughter of the count. After Maastricht, Verdugo returned to Thionville as governor, where he lived quietly for a few years with his family.²⁷ During these years, Dorothea would give birth to

²² Another rent in Naples followed his marriage to Dorothea Mansfeld.

²³ Rodríguez Villa 1890, pp. 19-24; Rumeu de Armas 1960, pp. 90-92; *Commentario del coronel Francisco Verdugo* 1899, pp. iii-ix.

²⁴ Rumeu de Armas 1960, pp. 92-93.

²⁵ Rumeu de Armas 1960, pp. 92-93; *Commentario del coronel Francisco Verdugo* 1899, pp. ix-x; Rodríguez Villa 1890, pp. 26-29.

²⁶ Rumeu de Armas 1960, pp. 93-95; *Commentario del coronel Francisco Verdugo* 1899, p. xi; Rodríguez Villa 1890, pp. 29-37. Octavio, born between 1562 and 1570. is possibly named after the Duke of Parma, Octavio Farnese, who met Mansfeld in Brussels in 1565. Pérez de Tudela and Bertini 2007, p. 58.

²⁷ He remained governor of Thionville until 1586.

Margaret in 1579 and to Joanne in 1581. In 1584 she was to give birth to a daughter Dorothea and she would finally die in childbirth in Groningen in 1586.²⁸ To sum up, his career until then could be called an unusual one. In spite of his relatively low birth, he made a very quick and successful career in the Low Countries. He did so not within the logical environment of the Spanish *tercios* but as an officer of mostly Walloon troops. This is chiefly due to the protection of Mondragón and the Count of Mansfeld, but he seems to have cooperated well with most of the governors of the Low Countries. However, we might consider him as part of the clientele of Mansfeld. It was also a fast moving career, making use of the possibilities given to a soldier in times of turmoil. This quick changing of functions in the fourteen years between 1567 and 1581 can be contrasted with the fourteen years he would remain in command in the North East. His career thus shows a clear turning point in the middle.

Verdugo's commentary

Verdugo was made governor of the North East during the short intermediate period when Margaret of Parma had returned to the Low Countries and had resumed government. Her son was left only responsible for the military leadership. However, Parma did not really accept being under his mother's wings again.²⁹ According to Rumeu de Armas, Verdugo's appointment was Alexander's doing, but it seems more plausible that Verdugo accepted because of his loyalty to Margaret.³⁰ For the time being, we cannot affirm that Margaret played a part in his appointment. However, his relation with Alexander Farnese might have been troubled by the problems this Governor General had with Charles of Mansfeld, the son of the old count. In 1580, George of Lalaing, Count of Rennenberg and stadholder of the North East (Frisia, Groningen and Drenthe), had changed sides, returning to the royal camp. From then on the government had to try to hold on to this isolated region against the surrounding rebellious territories. At first, Verdugo was summoned to raise new troops (as he had relinquished his previous command to Octavio of Mansfeld) and to join Rennenberg with his men. However, when the latter died on 23 July 1581, Verdugo became the new governor of the North East, a position he would keep for fourteen years, although only after 1585 with a formal nomination.³¹

²⁸ Rumeu de Armas 1960; *Commentario del coronel Francisco Verdugo* 1899, pp. xviii-xix. There is no certainty about Verdugo's children. Lonchay mentions five daughters and four sons out of his marriage to Dorothea, but he does not know about Esther and his information seems not very reliable. Rumeu de Armas, who made good use of Spanish archival sources, mentions apart from Guillermo, the son of Esther: Margarita (born 1579), Juana (born 1581), Dorothea (born 1584), and Filiberta Walburga (born Groningen 1586, died 1587). He also mentions one young-deceased son of Dorothea. Margarita married in Talavera in 1595 with Antonio Meneses y Manrique de Ayala. As her father had wanted her to marry a German noble and she had married without his consent, she was disinherited. Juana would marry Francisco Juan de Torres, a nobleman from Valencia who had fought in the Low Countries with Verdugo. Dorothea entered the convent of San Ildefonso in Talavera de la Reina. Lonchay mentions another two sons in the army, Juan and Francisco, but Rumeu de Armas has found no proof that Verdugo had any more children. Family documents of the Verdugo family can be found in the archive of Zlutice (part of the archive of Plzen) in the Czech Republic.

²⁹ Parker 1977, pp. 208-209.

³⁰ Rumeu de Armas 1960, p. 95; *Commentario del coronel Francisco Verdugo* 1899, pp. xi-xii; *Commentario* 1610, p. 8; Janssens 2007, p. 73.

³¹ Ros 1964.

His government can be divided into a first period of success, followed by a short but intense period of defeat. In the beginning, Verdugo quickly succeeded in controlling Groningen, followed by the conquest of important places like Steenwijk. He then continued towards Zutphen, Nijmegen, and Doesburg, and he even participated in the taking of Bonn. With Parma's actions from the south, taking Grave, Venlo, and other places, the North East was thus again joined with the rest of the royal Low Countries. But when in 1590 Parma had to take his troops in the direction of France, and the Count of Mansfeld temporarily replacing him, Verdugo quickly lost almost all of his ground, culminating in the fall of Groningen in 1594.³² By then, Parma had died (on 3 December 1592) and had been succeeded by the Count of Mansfeld, Verdugo's father in law, who stayed on as an interim governor of the Low Countries until February 1594. Finally, Verdugo was recalled in April 1594 by the new governor of the Low Countries, Archduke Ernst of Austria. It is also during this last period that he wrote his Comments. Verdugo died in Luxembourg on 22 September 1595.

In his introduction he clearly states the object of his work:

“Having heard from the court of these states that some worked against me, against all reason, led by their passions or particular interests, darkening my services, I thought it useful for me to cut the thread of their plots and designs in this way, not being able to do it in person for the moment”.

The main tension of his Comments is obvious, between his critics at court, and his lonely position far away from the centre of political power. Of course, there is also a testimony of truth to be found in his introduction: “relating plainly all the incidents of this period with obvious and pure truth”.³³

Apart from his criticism of the court and the central government, we can detect three other levels of comments: the functioning of the army and its personnel, the situation in the North East itself and his personal actions and position. Already before reaching Groningen, his description puts all of these elements into place within the first few pages of the text. Even before starting off for the North East, Verdugo is complaining about the slowness of the army, “they lingered more than I had wished them to do”. Another phrase carries the same message, now strengthened by the mentioning of witnesses “who saw that it was not my fault that we had not departed”. Apart from this, there were tensions between the captains because of payments with false coins.³⁴ Verdugo continues with the differences between the city of Groningen and the countryside, which were always quarrelling about privileges and pretensions. While the countryside favoured the rebels, the city decided to return to royal obedience. However, the city treated Rennenberg so badly that he became ill. Verdugo's comment is directly followed by a general remark on those of the city: “They have always had little respect for the orders of His Majesty and of his governors, to whom, at the end of

³² *Rondom de Reductie* 1994.

³³ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 1-2. “siendo advertido de la corte destos estados de los malos officios que en ella algunos me hazen contra razon procurando por sus passiones ó particulares interesses escurecer mis servicios, me ha parecido convenirme cortarles el hilo de sus tramas y desíños por este medio, no pudiendo por ahora hazerlo en persona”; “narrando llanamente todos los accidentes deste tiempo con tan manifiesta y pura verdad”.

³⁴ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 8-10. “se tardó mas tiempo de lo que yo quisiera”; “los quales vieron que no era por mi culpa no aver partido”.

their work and services, they have rendered a ruinous payment". The magistrates suffered from "the insatiable and wrongly founded ambition that they always have had". Those of Groningen had also forced the royal army to attack Frisia, "against all reasoning of war", leading to a terrible defeat with the enemy chasing the army until the city gates.³⁵ We also see him focussing on his own person. He describes himself in the beginning as somebody "who had never been in Frisia and [who] did not know how things were over there". Verdugo shows himself handling the situation with speed. His first action is a success: "With my coming and with the necessity of provisions of the enemies, they surrendered themselves". He was prepared to attack the enemy on his way, as he and his troops were ready and willing to fight. We find part of the reason for this fighting spirit in the fact that Verdugo also looked for an early fight before paying out the money he had with him. Unfortunately, the enemies were informed and fled.³⁶

These four levels of comments can be followed throughout the whole text, becoming stronger as the end approaches. However, I have decided to focus only on the criticism on the central government, or on criticism where the central government is at least involved. I have furthermore decided to divide this part again into two chronological periods. In the first period, the government is still holding on to most of its possessions, but with the loss of Zutphen and Deventer in 1591, the situation changed drastically leading up to the fall of Groningen.

Parma and Verdugo until the fall of Deventer and Zutphen

Directly after his arrival in Groningen, Verdugo informs us that he has sent a messenger to Parma and that he has not received a reply. There are two questions asked in his first messages to Parma: the first was whether he could be replaced, for example by the Lord of Billy,³⁷ and if not, whether he could at least receive official instructions as the new governor, as they did not want to listen to him without seeing a formal nomination in writing. The second question is of course about the sending of soldiers and provisions.³⁸ An early example is that of the siege of Lochem. Verdugo sends a Spanish captain with some enemy standards to court in order to convince Parma to send help for the completion of the siege that, he adds, had already cost so much blood and effort. He directly blames his enemies at court for the delays:

"There were some in the council, as I was informed afterwards, who said that I deserved punishment for having put myself in such a situation, without orders of my superior. This way, I was treated for these good services in a way one expects from the worst enemy I have had during all the time I have served in Frisia, and that has done most harm to the service of His Majesty, that is the ardent envy that I have witnessed being used against me".³⁹

³⁵ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 5, 8-9. "han siempre tenido poco respecto á las ordenes de su Magestad y á sus gobernadores, á quien á la fin de sus trabajos y servicios han dado muy ruin pago"; "la insaciable y mal fundada ambicion que siempre han tenido"; "contra toda razon de Guerra".

³⁶ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 8-11. "que no havia estado jamas en Frisa ni sabia como las cosas della estavan"; "con mi venida y con la necesidad de victuallas que los enemigos passavan se rindieron".

³⁷ Caspar de Robles, Lord of Billy, Stadholder of Friesland and Groningen between 1572 and 1576. Sevenster 1985; Fagel 2009a.

³⁸ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 21-22. See also p. 71.

³⁹ *Commentario* 1610, p. 33. "No faltó quien en el consejo, segun he sido despues informado, dixo que merescia castigo por haverme empeñado en tales sitios sin orden de mi superior. Assi por estos buenos

When help did arrive, Verdugo tells us that Charles of Mansfeld had come to his rescue without having received orders from Parma. However, Lonchay has found a letter in which clearly is stated that Parma had sent these troops. We might accuse Verdugo here at least of a failing memory, combined with a slightly distorted view on reality.⁴⁰

Verdugo does not hesitate to utter criticism on Parma as a military leader as well. For example, when Verdugo tries to convince him to attack Arnhem first, Parma decides for Grave. The way Parma organises the siege of Rheinberg is called by Verdugo an unnecessary waste of a lot of money. And he is not even being as explicit as he could: "I do not want to tell what I can about this for many reasons".⁴¹ The differences even lead to direct confrontations between the two men. When Parma asks for his opinion in the Council of War, Verdugo bluntly tells him he does not agree with him. No prince such as he nor a general should hide behind the walls of a fortified city. At this point he also tells Parma to take care on his journey and take a different route to his hiding place. The prince did not listen and was almost caught by Leicester: "Although I had warned...they did neither do the one thing nor the other".⁴² He feels that Parma does not treat him equally, supplying others with more troops, provisions and money.⁴³

Another element of criticism is focused on the nominations of Parma. Of course, this aspect is also related to Verdugo's own situation. When Parma nominates a new governor in Lingen, with Verdugo functioning in this office already for a long time, he says to have asked Parma to discharge him formally of this sworn position. He directly makes use of the situation to ask for a way out of the north and to serve the King in other parts of his realms.⁴⁴ In more general words, Parma is accused of bad government. He wants to show his power to make and to destroy men, to degrade them and to raise them, as he pleases. He repeats this image when he tells how Parma sends the Count of Mansfeld to finish a siege started by the Prince of Chimay. As a good nobleman, the count intentionally postpones his journey, in order that Chimay can finish the job and receive the honour.⁴⁵

According to Verdugo, Parma is also too much influenced by bad advisors, for instance when Verdugo had managed to convince him to attack Lochem. Nonetheless, the Prince changed his mind in the end: "As I understood afterwards, there were some who made him change his mind, saying that I wanted to make him obliged to me and other similar things". He also accused Parma of sending the Count of Mansfeld on an impossible mission in the north and says that the one who had informed Parma on the situation there, had to be someone who did not know the circumstances in the region (bad weather, much water, bad condition of the troops), or who had done this with bad

oficios despues he sido tratado como podia esperar del mayor enemigo que he tenido todo el tiempo que he servido en Frisa y el que mas daño ha hecho al servicio de Su Magestad que ha sido y es la calumniosa invidia como lo he visto en el termino que se ha usado conmigo".

⁴⁰ *Commentario* 1610, p. 34. Other examples of Parma not sending sufficient troops: *ibidem*, pp. 57-58.

⁴¹ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 77-79. "No quiero dezir lo que sobre esto podria por muchas causas".

⁴² *Commentario* 1610, pp. 80-82. See also p. 84 and 109-110 for criticism on Parma. "Aunque yo avia avisado...no hizieron ni lo uno ni lo otro".

⁴³ *Commentario* 1610, p. 89.

⁴⁴ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 102-104.

⁴⁵ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 95, 100.

intentions.⁴⁶ When he does not get a reaction from Parma when asking for troops and provisions “because otherwise everything would be lost here”, he fulminates against the advisors at court:⁴⁷

“Some ministers close to his person reacted to this saying that I often wrote that Frisia was being lost and that it never ended up that way, and asking for some Spaniards and Italians to mix them with Germans, they laughed at me, asking soldiers from these nations for Frisia. It is with this esteem that they always have held my reports, this province and my person, and it seems to me that considering the importance of this country, they could have taken it more into account than they have done”.⁴⁸

These advisors at court also spread rumours about Verdugo allegedly keeping money for himself. However, he writes that the money he raises in the north is always in the hands of government officials, and he never interferes. And what is more, this money is never enough having to pay a lot of money himself, and even once leaving his wife and daughters as pawns when he had run out of credit. It is a very important point for Verdugo and he allows himself, as he calls it, a *pequeña disgresión* in order to defend himself. We find that a large part of his defence against these accusations has been left out in the 1610 edition. For this reason, two references to the customs of the *casa de Borgoña* were left out, the first stating that government officials should be the first to hear of any financial problem concerning them and that it should not be told first to slanderers. The second reference informs us that it was the Burgundian custom to serve without receiving income.⁴⁹

Another point to be mentioned here is the fact that Verdugo often does not receive answers to his messages to Parma. For example, when he wants to ask permission to use artillery in an attack within the German Empire, he sends three or four messengers, but he does not get an answer.⁵⁰ However, letters complaining about the addressee not responding, or not responding enough, or too slowly, are a commonplace in the art of early modern letter writing. Everybody, almost always, seems to complain about not receiving letters. So this element might not be taken too seriously. But of course, there existed great difficulty in bringing over messages from the North East to the court in the south.

At one point, Verdugo decides to go to the court in Brussels. He says he did this because he had heard that some people had complained against him for not having attacked a certain fortress. Again he criticises his enemies at court. However, there seems to be another reason for his journey to Brussels. Parma had gone to France and the government was now in the hands of Peter Ernst of Mansfeld, his father in law. He

⁴⁶ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 87-88, 101-102. “Segun entendi despues, ubo algunos que le mudaron la voluntad diziendo que yo le queria empeñar y otras cosas semejantes”.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*: “porque de otra manera todo lo de aca se perdia”.

⁴⁸ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 108-109. “Algunos ministros que estavan cerca de su persona dezian á esto que yo escrivia muchas vezes que Frisia se perdia y nunca se acabava de perder, y pidiendo algunos españoles é italianos para mezclarlos con alemanes, se burlavan de que pidiesse estas naciones para Frisa. En esta estima se han tenido siempre mis avisos, esta provincia y mi persona, pareciendome á mi que segun la ymportancia deste pays se podia tener mas quenta con él del que se a tenido”. In 1579, it were the loyal provinces that insisted on not sending Spaniards to Frisia, so Parma and his advisors were not the only ones to blame. Janssens 2007, p. 72.

⁴⁹ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 34, 38, 43, 45, 53, 66-67. See also p. 133.

⁵⁰ *Commentario* 1610, p. 93. See also pp. 28, 117-119.

does not say this explicitly at first, but there are explicit changes from the use of *Su Alteza* to the use of *Su Excellencia* in the text. Verdugo is also present at the Council of State. However, when he is busy negotiating with Mansfeld about sending help to the North East, Parma returns from France. Then, Verdugo tries to convince Parma to start an attack into Utrecht and Holland from the strongholds of Deventer and Zutphen, but Parma decides against it. Then Verdugo asked him to protect at least these two cities as the rebels would certainly attack them, seen the importance of these places. And ignoring his advice, Parma does not support these two cities in time, and so they are indeed taken by the enemy. In the words of Verdugo, by that time, “the Hollanders were now in command of the war”.⁵¹

Verdugo and the loss of the North East

With the enemy on the attack, the central line in Verdugo’s text is clearly the need for assistance. At the same time he is not allowed to return to the North East, and when Prince Maurits attacks Nijmegen, Verdugo finds himself with an army in between Maastricht and Roermond. In stead of letting him return to the north, Mansfeld, taking over the government again, with Parma once more in France, makes him come to Brussels: Thus we find Verdugo again at court exactly when Mansfeld is in charge.⁵² For months he remains there without receiving any money for the North East. In his Comments he does not mention that he uses his stay in Brussels also to attempt – albeit unsuccessfully – to convince Mansfeld to let him return to Spain. After Parma sends him back to the north again, he continues on asking for assistance: “I never stopped petitioning for help”. He even claims that with enough infantry he would have been able to defeat the enemy, as the enemy gave great opportunity to do so. According to Verdugo, Parma and Mansfeld finally sent him troops in order to free themselves of his continuous petitions. However, it was not enough, and it was all too late. Had he received all the troops at once and during the dry season, he would have taught Maurits a lesson, or in his own words, at that time “Count Maurits and his army were in great danger of being ruined or receiving considerable damage”. Verdugo adds a philosophical remark at this point: “In the end, victories come from God and He gives them to whom he pleases, but it is also necessary that men help themselves and provide their part without letting everything depend on good fortune”.⁵³ The new soldiers had also come without any money to pay them. And the situation was even worse, as the soldiers were convinced that Verdugo had their money, as even the *maestro de campo* of the Italians had written. It was all false, and again he blames his enemies at court:

“Of such and comparable charity I have received very much at this court, and its inventors have caused me a lot of work and disturbances in the service of His Majesty, causing the soldiers to lose their respect, and without it, they cannot be well governed”.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 115-117: “los Holandeses avian tomado el manejo de la Guerra”.

⁵² *Commentario* 1610, pp. 125-133.

⁵³ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 134-148. “Nunca yo cessava de solicitar el Socorro”; “el conde Mauricio y su exercito estavan en gran peligro de perderse ó recibir un notable daño”; “Al fin las victorias vienen de Dios y El las da a quien es servido, pero tambien es necessario que los hombres se ayuden y provean de su parte sin dexar tales cosas á la ventura”.

⁵⁴ *Commentario* 1610, p. 150. “De estas y semejantes caridades se me han hecho muchas en essa corte, y sus inventores no me han sido de poco trabajo y estorvo al servicio de su Magestad, siendo causa de que los soldados pierdan el respecto sin el qual no pueden ser bien gobernados”.

At that point, Verdugo writes about the death of Parma, with an obligatory “whom God shall keep in heaven”, but without any qualifications regarding the deceased Governor General of the Low Countries and Prince of the Habsburg family. Moreover, the remark is placed within a sentence where he lets us know that Mansfeld had sent him new troops, even together with some money to pay them with. It was the first time, he claims, that he received both soldiers and money at the same time. He clearly tries to favour the image of Mansfeld compared to that of Parma. In reality, Parma and Mansfeld had worked closely together for years, but their relationship deteriorated during the two short periods Mansfeld took over the government. In the end, Farnese even complained about the old count to the King.⁵⁵ However, the army Mansfeld had sent arrived too late, as one could not fight during the wet autumn.⁵⁶ From then on, the role of *Su Alteza* is fulfilled by Ernst of Austria, who is also criticised for not answering Verdugo’s letters: “because he did not respond to the many letters I wrote”. A relief force for Groningen is finally promised, but the preparation of the troops went very slowly, partly due to mutiny. Again there are problems with the payments, as Verdugo received some money, but not enough to pay for two wages, though this had been promised. Verdugo is blamed again and defends himself by stating that the payments were done by a commissioner and he did not have anything to do with it. He also claims that though the army was not very large, there were many officers that had to be paid. Now the troops in the north were mutinying as well. It seems therefore that even after the death of Parma, Verdugo remained having problems with some people at court:

“Because of the distance there existed between here and that court, or because of wickedness, some people with particular interests or ignorance on all matters, inform wrongly and not according to the truth”.⁵⁷

When referring to his last days in the North East, Verdugo writes mostly about his own army and the problems they had with the local people helping the rebels. On the one hand, we find mutiny, lack of good officers, lack of order, lack of provisions, many sick men, no money, desertion, plundering, complaints of runaway soldiers to the government about him, soldiers fearing that Verdugo will send them all to die in battle, soldiers that refuse to stay within a fort. On the other hand, we find more and more treason committed by the people and the magistrates of Groningen.⁵⁸ Verdugo himself tries to continue the war against his own good senses. He still tries to engage the enemy into battle, but “more because of despair than based on reason of war”. He even still believes in good possibilities, but unfortunately the matters of war do not always go as one would wish. He even leads a good organized last attack, this time with sufficient provisions, stating “that in this way difficult undertakings become simple and on the contrary the simple ones become difficult, when everything necessary is lacking”. Of course, we find him stating that for him the most important thing was that they could keep the region, “the loss of my person would be only a small loss”. And of course, we

⁵⁵ Janssens 2007, pp. 75-76; García García 2007, p. 129.

⁵⁶ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 150-155: “que Dios tenga en el cielo”.

⁵⁷ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 167-179, 185-186. “porque á muchas cartas que le escrivia no me respondia”; “Mas por la distancia que ay de aqui á essa corte ó por malicia algunos con passion o ignorancia de las cosas informan fuera de camino y de la verdad”.

⁵⁸ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 150-187.

hear that during all this time he stayed with the suffering troops and suffered just in the same way as the most humble of them all.⁵⁹ A true Spanish officer until the very end.⁶⁰

As a writer, Verdugo ends his story with a conclusion on the whole of the comments. The government had never given him the necessary support. He says he had always feared that this was because of some people at court, but at the moment of writing his text, he was now sure of this:

“I feared, and now I have seen that I was not mistaken, that around His Highness there were some people who did not do good work for me, either because of gifts, or because of personal interests; that close to a prince, corrupt and biased ministers usually are very harmful”.

His early successes were blocked by envy and malice and after the fall of Groningen he was attacked by some who knew how to convert good into evil, “without any certainty of saying the truth”. His comments are proof of all of this and although Verdugo does not give us the direct evidence, he ends by stating that all he has argued can be proven with “sufficient information, letters and orders by my superiors and copies of the ones I have sent them”.⁶¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Comments give us a completely different view of Parma's government in the Low Countries than the one we are used to. During the whole of the fourteen years of Verdugo's government in the North East, Parma never really tried to defend these territories. He is accused of errors of judgement, and of personal faults as a leading prince. Most of this is hidden as criticism directed at some of his advisors at court, but it might also be a way of avoiding too much direct criticism towards a prince of royal blood. As Verdugo himself mentioned, there were things about Parma he did not want to write down. In any case, we are dealing, at the very least, with the image of a governor of the Low Countries listening too much to bad advisors.

Though not in a direct manner, the Comments also reflect his position as being part of the clientele of the old Count of Mansfeld. This must also have had some influence on Verdugo's position at court. He goes to Brussels only twice, both times when Mansfeld is in charge, and only in the short period after Parma's death does he receive troops and money at the same time, sent by the same Mansfeld. And, although

⁵⁹ *Commentario* 1610, pp., 153, 155, 162, 164-166, 173, 176. “mas por desesperacion que por razon de guerra”; “que desta manera se hazen las empresas dificiles faciles y al contrario las faciles dificultades, faltando lo necessario”; “era poca perdida la de mi persona”.

⁶⁰ As stated in the text, I have focused on Verdugo's complaints of the government. The three other main layers of complaints, around his person, the army, and the North East itself, have only been mentioned at the very beginning and the very end of the article. There is for example much more to be said about the army and about his relation to the city of Groningen. See also the introduction to Verdugo 2009 by Jan van den Broek.

⁶¹ *Commentario* 1610, pp. 190-191. “Yo temia, y ahora echo de ver que no me engaño, que cerca de dicha Alteza avia algunos que no me hazian buenos oficios, ó por presentes, ó por passion particular; que cerca de un principe los ministros corruptibles y apasionados suelen hazer mucho daño”; “sin ninguna certeza de que sea verdad lo que dicen”; “bastantes informaciones, cartas y ordenes de mis superiores y copias de las que yo les he escripto”.

most of the losses occur during the interim government of Mansfeld, the comments clearly point to the government of Parma as the principal cause of defeat.

Maybe his relatively low birth also influenced his position at court. Was this ordinary soldier ever taken seriously as governor of a whole province? And he was also a Spanish soldier, again a factor that might have provoked the enmity of some of these courtiers, both Netherlanders and Italians. After an unusual career Verdugo had reached an exalted position, and as the Dutch say, “high trees catch a lot of wind”, meaning that you are extremely vulnerable in a high position, and in the North East of the Low Countries, there is always a very strong wind blowing over the flat lands.

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