

IRISH HISTORICAL  
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# The Irish in the Spanish Armies in the Seventeenth Century



EDUARDO DE MESA

The Irish in the Spanish Armies in the  
Seventeenth Century

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# The Irish in the Spanish Armies in the Seventeenth Century

*Eduardo de Mesa*

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## Foreword

The publication of Geoffrey Parker's *Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road* (1972) was a watershed moment in early modern military history. The book provided a comprehensive 'inside' view of the workings of the most significant military institution in Europe between 1560 and 1660, and set the agenda for subsequent debate about early modern military organisation and administration, discipline and motivation, and the centrality of logistics and communications to military operations. Although subsequent works have built on this original framework, they have generally shared Parker's focus on the Spanish, more particularly the Castilian, element of the armies of the king of Spain. At the heart of the armies was an elite of native Spanish troops, notably those concentrated in the *Tercios Viejos* and the elite cavalry units, whose recruitment, officer corps and administration were directly controlled by the Castilian central authorities and their representatives within the army. The institutional development of this element of the army, above all in Flanders, with its hospitals, support-systems, military training, carefully maintained personnel and fiscal records, stands in stark contrast to the ad hoc and haphazard military administration of European states generally regarded as more 'progressive' than Habsburg Spain.

Yet the focus on these Castilian troops and their military institutions neglects a wider issue, what may indeed have been the greatest strength of the early modern Spanish *monarquía*. For more than a precocious Castilian administration, the *monarquía* was most notable for its ability to co-opt and integrate into a collective military and administrative system both the constituent nations of the Habsburg ruler's territories, and also the soldiers, sailors, merchants, professional classes and nobles of foreign states. The Spanish *monarquía* was the greatest example of what Sir John Elliott identified as the early modern 'composite monarchy'. Yet for too long the assessment has been a negative one: the Catalan and Portuguese revolts of 1640 are often cited to demonstrate that the composite model was a hopeless anachronism, unable to compete with emergent nation states. Only recently has recognition started to grow that there is a more positive aspect: the capacity of the Spanish *monarquía* to integrate the military and governing elites of its numerous territories, and the resilience and resources this offered to the Spanish system. No less important is the way the *monarquía* could deploy its universalist credentials in conjunction with its reputation for wealth and reward to enlist the services of subjects from other, outsider 'nations'. As Parker's book makes clear, the Castilian soldiers and their administrative arrangements were never more than a minority of the Army of Flanders. If a large portion of the Spanish armies were made up of the king of Spain's other subjects – Walloons, Italians, Franche-Comtois – then another large portion was composed of foreigners: Germans, Eastern Europeans, English, Irish and many others.

Studying this process of co-option and integration is important from the perspective of military history: for instance, how were between 80 and 90 per cent of

## FOREWORD

the non-Spanish soldiers of the Army of Flanders recruited, paid, fed and disciplined? It is no less important for the historian of politics and of social and cultural structures: the army, after the church, was the largest single institution in the *monarquía*, and was the litmus test of wider processes that sought to combine organisational integration with an acceptance of diversity and distinctive identity. These processes need to be better understood, and may well have more to say to contemporary Europe than the historians' traditional focus on early modern state-building. The present work by Eduardo de Mesa represents an important first step in what deserves to grow into a comprehensive project of studying the way in which the Spanish *monarquía* managed to integrate and make effective a military system incorporating a multiplicity of communities apparently separated by language, culture, history and particular military traditions. In this respect, the Irish 'nation' in Spanish service is an excellent starting point for a detailed study. The number of Irish soldiers in service was never large when compared, say, to the German regiments in the Army of Flanders. However, the extensive archival holdings in Simancas, Brussels, Ireland, London and elsewhere relating to the hiring, maintenance and service of the Irish troops and their officers clearly allows for a scrupulously detailed study of the subject. Despite their small numbers, perception of the fighting quality and veteran status of the Irish soldiers ensured their recruitment was a high priority for the Spanish Crown, and that much negotiation, correspondence and organisational effort went into seeking their service.

Study of the Irish troops can provide answers to questions, and it can also raise important issues and an agenda for future research. The Castilian *Tercios Viejos* of the Army of Flanders present a limited model of centralised recruitment and direct control achievable (for a limited time) by a wealthy state maintaining an elite, standing force. In contrast, the Irish troops in Spanish service – both in Flanders and, as the present book illustrates, in the Spanish Peninsula from the 1630s onwards – return to the much more typical, but much less studied, world of service under private contracts and of military enterprise. Spanish attempts to recruit Irish soldiers, as de Mesa shows, rarely resulted in the hoped-for numbers of troops, and in many cases recruitment initiatives failed altogether. Yet these difficulties and frustration underpin a rich variety of arrangements with contractors, varying from pure military enterprise (recruiting, equipping and transporting troops entirely at the expense of the contractor) through various intermediate arrangements involving some element of cash advance, subsistence or transport payments. Any notion that there was a single contractual alternative to central recruitment, even one arrangement per 'nation', is challenged by the Irish experience. Obtaining Irish troops involved a complex and changeable sharing of risk between enterprisers and the Spanish Crown, in which cash and credit vied with influence and reputation among the potential private contractors. But once in service, whether in Flanders or Peninsula Spain, one generalisation can be asserted: the Irish soldiers and their officers provided an outstanding demonstration not only of the quality of troops recruited and maintained under private enterprise, but of the success of the Spanish system in integrating distinct organisational structures and assumptions into a collective and sustained military effort. The Irish military community in Spanish service was all-but extinct by the later seventeenth century, but this owed more

## FOREWORD

to a determined French effort to absorb the market in Irish mercenaries rather than any Spanish disillusionment with the military qualities of the Irish 'nation' or with reliance upon the services of its military enterprisers. The present study of one element of the early modern 'business of war' is important in itself. But it also points to many larger questions about military organisation through contractors and enterprisers, and about the nature of the Spanish *monarquía*, that deserve future attention.

David Parrott  
3/01/2014

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Eduardo de Mesa  
El Escorial

## *Abbreviations*

A: Audience  
ACA: Archivo de la Corona de Aragón  
Add.: Additional  
AGR: Archives Générales du Royaume/Algemeen Rijksarchief  
AGS: Archivo General de Simancas  
AHN: Archivo Histórico Nacional  
BL: British Library  
BNE: Biblioteca Nacional de España  
CJH: Consejo y Juntas de Hacienda  
CMC 3<sup>a</sup>: Contaduría Mayor de Cuentas, tercera época  
D.: Don  
E: Estado  
GA: Guerra Antigua  
IHCM: Instituto de Historia y Cultura Militar  
Leg.: Legajo  
MPD: Mapas, planos y dibujos  
OM: Órdenes Militares  
PEA: Lettres missives du fonds des papiers d'État et de l'Audience  
SEG: Secrétairerie d'État et de Guerre  
SM: Servicios Militares  
UCD-OFM: University College Dublin, Franciscan Order Archive

# Glossary

*Alférez*: Second in command of a company, he carried the battle-standard in combat.

*Armada del Mar Océano*: The Spanish Atlantic fleet.

*Auditor*: Judge advocate of the army.

*Aventajado*: Soldier who enjoyed a *ventaja*.

*Ayuda de costa*: Money given by the authorities to give punctual help to a soldier, normally for travel expenses.

*Ayudante de Teniente de Maestre de Campo General*: Adjutant of the *teniente de maestre de campo general*.

*Ayudante*: Adjutant of the sergeant major, usually two per *Tercio*.

*Caballos-corazas*: Heavy cavalry equipped with breast and back plates, helmet and a buff coat. Their main weapons were a pair of pistols, a sword and sometimes an arquebus or a carbine.

*Cabo de escuadra*: Corporal who commanded a squad of twenty-five soldiers.

*Camarada*: A close-knit group or ‘cameraderie’ composed of eight soldiers who shared their goods communally and trained the new recruits.

*Capitán de campaña*: Head of the military police of a *Tercio*.

*Consulta*: An advisory document for the king prepared by a council or a *junta*.

*Contador*: An army accountant.

*Coronelía*: A regiment raised by members of the Spanish *Grandeza* (the uppermost echelon in the high nobility of Spain).

*Entretenido*: A military figure in receipt of a monthly grant while waiting for a commission.

*Entretenimiento*: A monthly grant given to an *entretenido*.

*Escuadrón*: A squadron or group of soldiers formed on an *ad hoc* basis for a special task.

*Escudo*: A unit of Spanish currency silver coinage. It was worth ten or 11 *reales* or 50 *placas* or 340 *maravedís*.

*Furrier mayor*: Quartermaster major of a *Tercio*.

*Furrier*: Quartermaster of a company.

*Hidalguía*: The lower nobility of Spain.

## GLOSSARY

*Juntas*: Boards of councillors from different councils, but with the advantage that they did not suffer the delays of the councils' complicated bureaucracies and procedures.

*Maestre de Campo General*: The highest officer of infantry and only second highest officer of all the army after the governor-general or the captain-general.

*Maestre de Campo*: The commander of a *Tercio*, literally meaning 'master of the field' but not to be confused with the rank of field marshal.

*Maravedí*: A Spanish coin, 340 *maravedís* were the equivalent of an *escudo* of ten *reales*.

*Pagador*: Paymaster of the army.

*Pan de munición*: Bread issued every two days to the soldiers as part of their payment.

*Placas*: Spanish translation for *pattards*, Flemish coinage.

*Ramo*: A detachment of a company which, depending on its task, could be commanded by an officer.

*Real*: Spanish silver coin worth 34 *maravedís*.

*Socorro*: A third or a half part of a monthly payment that was given to soldiers by the military authorities during a muster.

*Teniente de Maestre de Campo General*: Lieutenant of the *maestre de campo general*.

*Tercio*: A unit comprising several companies, commanded by a *maestre de campo*.

*Valido*: Favourite of the Spanish king who acted as chief minister.

*Veedor*: Inspector of the forces.

*Ventaja ordinaria*: A monthly grant given by a company's captain from the assigned 30 *escudos* to a soldier to encourage him to do better service.

*Ventaja particular*: A monthly grant given by the king or the governor-general to a soldier for particularly good services.

## *Conventions*

Dates throughout the text are given according to the New (Gregorian) Calendar, which was used in most of continental Europe in this period. The beginning of the year is taken, however, as 1 January rather than 25 March.

Modern English spellings have been preferred for proper names in the main text. However, in the footnotes, proper names have been reflected as they were recorded by the Spanish clerks.

Throughout the text, the term Old English refers to the descendants of the Anglo-Normans, English, Welsh and Fleming colonists who came to Ireland after the Anglo-Norman invasion (1169–71). They were mainly concentrated in the Pale – Dublin, Meath, Louth, Kildare and Kilkenny – and in Westmeath, Wexford and Galway. During the sixteenth century they maintained their Catholicism, although they were loyal subjects of the English Crown until 1641.

The Hiberno-Norman term refers to the descendants of the colonists who settled in the borderlands of the territory under the Crown's authority. During the fourteenth-century Gaelic re-conquest they were placed beyond direct royal influence, being virtually Gaelicised chieftains of English lineage. In the sixteenth century they were the spearhead of the opposition to the English government.

# Introduction

*'I can accuse myself for being more Spanish than Irish, for there [Ireland] I have only my origin, but here [Spain, I have], my whole being ...'*

John O'Neill, Count of Tyrone<sup>1</sup>

Since the early 1990s a significant contribution has been made to the historiography of the relationship between the Spanish monarchy and Ireland during the early modern period. In building upon the earlier pioneering studies of Brendan Jennings, John J. Silke and Micheline Kerney Walsh, recent research – such as the work of Declan M. Downey, Enrique García, Benjamin Hazard, Gráinne Henry, Patricia O'Connell, Ciaran O'Scea, Igor Pérez, Óscar Recio, Ofelia Rey and Karin Schüller – has allowed for a comprehensive understanding of this relationship and its role in Spanish and Irish history. These excellent studies tend to focus on the diplomatic, political, cultural, religious, commercial and social aspects of the relationship. However, while the military aspect of the relationship has received some scholarly attention, the features and characteristics of Irish military service to the Spanish Habsburg dynasty have yet to be subject to a detailed study.

The Spanish armies of the early modern period were formed by different 'nations', and it is hence surprising that historians have not yet provided a detailed analysis of any of the 'nations' who served the major European and indeed world power of this period. An examination of the relations between each 'nation' and the Crown, and how these worked in practice, can help improve our understanding of the nature of personal and informal relations, and their dynamics and significance in the evolution of the patronage systems and networks that were so important for society during the *ancien régime*. The study of one of these 'nations' in Spanish Habsburg service can help shed light on this issue, as well as creating a template for future research on all the other 'nations'.

The first major publication regarding Irish soldiers under Spanish colours was by Brendan Jennings. His book, *Wild Geese in Spanish Flanders, 1582–1700* (Dublin, 1964), is a classic piece of original research. It remains a vital reference work as it contains a vast amount of information, drawn from the Archives Générales du Royaume/Algemeen Rijksarchief in Brussels, regarding the Irish contingent in the Army of Flanders. Its short introduction provides a brief analysis of the information presented, while the rest of the work gives a generally unconnected and unexplained list of Irish officers and soldiers and items of information pertaining to them. This detailed calendar is so extensive that it is impossible to undertake

<sup>1</sup> AGS-GA, leg. 1276, Tyrone to Philip IV, 23 August 1638. *'Pudiéndome reputar a mí por más español que irlandés, pues de allá sólo tengo el origen y de acá toda mi naturaleza ...'*

Philip III of Spain recognised Hugh O'Neill's title of earl of Tyrone, rendered 'Conde de Tiron'. Although the title was forfeited by the English authorities in 1607, it was granted by Philip III to O'Neill's son, John. The earls of Tyrconnell and of Desmond received the same privilege in Spain. This explains why these noblemen are referred to as counts, rather than earls, throughout the text.

a study of the Irish ‘nation’ under Spanish colours without it. Yet unfortunately, Jennings only concentrated his research on the archives in Brussels, and he did not have the opportunity to extend his research to the relevant primary sources in the Archivo General de Simancas and in the various archival repositories in Madrid.

Another well-known publication regarding Irish soldiers in Spanish service is Gráinne Henry’s *The Irish Military Community in Spanish Flanders, 1586–1621* (Dublin, 1992). Henry’s book deals with the emergence of an Irish community in Flanders from 1587 and its development until 1621, although in reality the study only extends to 1609. The fact that the work depends heavily on Jennings reflects the latter’s authority in this area. However, the book misses an opportunity to expand on Jennings’ pioneering study as the work fails to draw on the relevant archives in Madrid or Simancas. Nevertheless, the book has value in that Henry scrutinises the English reasons for permitting recruitment in Ireland for Spanish service, the Irish reactions to English policy, relations among émigrés and the evolution of an Irish community in Flanders. Henry’s study would clearly have benefited from examining the composition and structure of Sir William Stanley’s regiment or of Henry O’Neill’s *Tercio* and its companies, its military achievements, the training of its soldiers or indeed the recruitment methods for the Army of Flanders.

Robert A. Stradling’s book, *The Spanish Monarchy and Irish Mercenaries: The Wild Geese in Spain, 1618–1668* (Dublin, 1994), incorporates a focus on Irish recruitment for Philip IV’s wars in Spain from 1640 until 1668. His use of some documents from the Spanish archives suggests that he only studied some of the large levies that were undertaken during the 1640s and 1650s.

Throughout the first forty years of the seventeenth century, Irish officers and soldiers were among the best troops to have fought for the Spanish Habsburg monarchy. The number of Irish in the Spanish armed forces was at its highest during the reign of Philip IV (1621–65). In the first half of Philip IV’s reign, from 1621 to 1644, the Irish ‘nation’ was involved in every military campaign of the Spanish monarchy, and Irish soldiers were regarded as veteran ‘crack’ troops. A special relationship existed between the king and the Irish émigrés. Their situation was a matter of personal concern for Philip IV, as it was for both his father and grandfather.

From 1605 to 1644 the Spanish Army of Flanders counted several *Tercios* in its ranks formed of Irish émigrés. They were mostly veterans who had learned their profession in the Spanish school of war in Flanders. In 1621, after the resumption of the struggle between Spain and the Dutch Republic, Irish soldiers were continually present under arms. Chapter I describes the origin and strength of the Irish *Tercios*, as well as their composition and their command structures within the context of the Spanish military establishment. Chapter II discusses recruitment methods and the different attempts to organise and transport the Irish recruits who were so badly needed by Philip IV’s army in the Low Countries. Irish soldiers were involved in every major operation of the seasonal campaigns in Flanders against the Dutch and the French, and this provides the focus of Chapter III, within the context of the Military Revolution theorists’ assertion that the Spanish military machine was highly inefficient.

## INTRODUCTION

The Irish contingent did not only serve in Flemish battlefields, however. Chapter IV consequently details the Spanish efforts to recruit Irishmen for deployment in Spain from 1630 to 1644. These efforts ultimately failed to meet expectations. After the French declared war on Spain in 1635, a new front was opened on the Peninsula itself. In 1638, two Irish *Tercios* were sent from Flanders to Spain with the objective of forming the backbone of a new army together with other veteran units. There had not been a standing army in the Peninsula since 1580. The involvement of the Irish *Tercios* in the operations in Fuenterrabía, Rosellón and Catalonia provides the focal points for Chapters V and VI. Chapter VII discusses the service of the Irish troops based in Extremadura, who were engaged against the Portuguese in a campaign to recapture Lisbon after the revolt of 1640.

This book aims to provide the first detailed reconstruction of these ‘nations’ on the basis of the unpublished archival sources contained in the Spanish Habsburg Councils of State and of War. It also seeks to challenge the assertions of the Military Revolution theorists by critically examining the Irish *Tercios* and how their organisation, skill and strategy reflected military developments and advances within the Spanish armies. It is hoped this study will help to provide a more informed perspective, based on empirical evidence, concerning not only the nature and experience of the Irish *Tercios*, but of the Spanish military machine as a whole during the seventeenth century.



*The Irish Military Contingent  
in Flanders, 1605–44*



# Chapter 1

## *Origins, Composition and Strength*

### The War of Flanders

According to the members of the Spanish Council of State, the Dutch Revolt and the ensuing Eighty Years' War (or the War of Flanders as it was known by the Spanish) began in 1559.<sup>1</sup> After the return to Spain of Philip II, the son and heir of Emperor Charles V,<sup>2</sup> the Flemish and Walloon nobility felt aggrieved because they had been expelled from power. The Spanish monarch had chosen Philip's half-sister, Margaret of Parma, as his governor-general, assisted by Antoine Perrenot, the future Cardinal Granvelle, as her main councillor. The local nobility's influence and power of patronage consequently faded, and they lost much of the status they had enjoyed during the rule of Charles V.<sup>3</sup>

The nobility's opposition to Philip II gradually became evident. The split broadened as a result of the socio-economic consequences stemming from the long struggle between the Spanish and the French monarchies for European mastery. The struggle ended in 1559 with the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis, which recognised the Spanish victory. Although Castile had paid most of the military expenses, in the Habsburg Netherlands the local population believed they had sustained almost all of the costs.<sup>4</sup> The socio-political situation was further compounded by religious affairs as the struggle between the Catholics and the Calvinists became more violent. The royal reaction to the 'iconoclastic fury' and other disturbances augmented the confrontation with the noblemen; many of them had embraced Protestantism or were crypto-Protestants. Moreover, the prince of Orange, William the 'Silent', a former supporter of Charles V and one of the strongest noblemen of the Low Countries, had begun to favour the rebel faction.<sup>5</sup>

The king eventually decided to send an army to re-impose his rule over the Habsburg Netherlands. The Army of Flanders was created in 1567 after the arrival of four Spanish *Tercios*, led by the duke of Alba.<sup>6</sup> The army numbered eight thousand foot soldiers supported by two thousand cavalry,<sup>7</sup> and gradually expanded

<sup>1</sup> AGS-E, leg. 634, fol. 62, 'El remedio general de las cosas de Flandes'.

<sup>2</sup> Charles had inherited part of the states which formed the Habsburg Netherlands from his father Philip I the 'Fair', duke of Burgundy. The rest was annexed during the emperor's rule.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall (1477–1806)* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 137–41.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *España y la rebelión de Flandes* (Madrid, 1989), pp. 38–9.

<sup>5</sup> Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> William S. Maltby, *Alba: A Biography of Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Third Duke of Alba, 1507–1582* (Berkeley, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567–1659* (Cambridge, 2004); René Quatrefages, *Los Tercios españoles (1567–1577)* (Madrid, 1979); Fernando González, *The Road to Rocroi: Class, Culture and Command in the Spanish Army of Flanders, 1567–1659* (Leiden, 2009).

to include units of foot and horse of Italian, Walloon, Burgundian and German troops. Non-Spanish units were referred to as ‘nations’.<sup>8</sup>

Political affairs under Alba’s governorship led most of the population, including the Catholics, into open revolt. William of Orange became the leader of the opposition to Philip II. At the end of 1572, large parts of the northern provinces of the Low Countries were in the hands of Orange’s supporters. For a long time the rebel faction fought for its own survival, counting on the support of the Catholic provinces until 1579, when they signed the Treaty of Arras, again accepting the sovereignty of Philip II.<sup>9</sup>

During the following decade the Army of Flanders, under the command of the Governor-General Alexander Farnese, duke of Parma and nephew of Philip II, reconquered a large number of rebel territories. In 1585 Antwerp fell into Spanish hands, and the boundaries between the Dutch Republic and the Catholic Low Countries had been shaped.<sup>10</sup> However, the distraction of the Armada campaign and the Spanish involvement in the French civil wars facilitated a counter-attack by the Dutch troops against Spanish strongholds in the north of the provinces of Flanders and Brabant and on the northern frontiers of the Low Countries with the German Empire during the 1590s.<sup>11</sup>

But the pillars of Habsburg rule over the Catholic Low Countries proved to be very strong. At the beginning of the seventeenth century Spanish troops were defeated at the battle of Nieuport (1600). The *stadholder* of Holland, Maurice of Nassau, son and heir of William the ‘Silent’, believed that, as a consequence of the defeat, the Walloon and Flemish population would rebel against the government of Archduke Albert.<sup>12</sup> Yet the reaction of the Catholic population was very different. Albert received the support needed to put Ostend under siege and eradicate the Dutch thorn in the side of the province of Flanders.<sup>13</sup> The siege, which lasted for four years (1601–4), ended with a hard-earned victory for the Spanish troops under the command of the Genovese general and banker, Ambrogio Spínola.<sup>14</sup> During the following campaigns, in 1605 and 1606, the Army of Flanders successfully assaulted

<sup>8</sup> Luis Ribot, ‘Las naciones en el ejército de los Austrias’, in Antonio Álvarez-Ossorio and Bernardo García (eds), *La monarquía de las naciones: Patria, nación y naturaleza en la monarquía de España* (Madrid, 2004), pp. 653–77; Óscar Recio, ‘La gente de naciones en los ejércitos de los Austrias hispanos: servicio, confianza y correspondencia’, in Enrique García and Davide Maffi (eds), *Guerra y sociedad en la monarquía hispánica. Política, estrategia y cultura en la Europa moderna (1500-1700)* (2 vols, Madrid, 2006), i, pp. 651–80.

<sup>9</sup> Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, Chapters 8–9.

<sup>10</sup> James D. Tracy, *The Founding of the Dutch Republic: War, Finance and Politics in Holland 1572–1588* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 215–24.

<sup>11</sup> Parker, *España y la rebelión de Flandes*, Chapters 3–6; Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, pp. 233–54.

<sup>12</sup> Albert was the sovereign of the Catholic Low Countries after his wedding with Isabel Clara Eugenia, daughter of Philip II, who gave Flanders to the couple as dowry. Luc Duerloo, *Dynasty and Piety: Archduke Albert (1598–1621) and Habsburg Political Culture in an Age of Religious Wars* (Aldershot, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Henrard, *Histoire du siège d’Ostende, 1601–1604* (Brussels, 1890); Werner Thomas (ed.), *De val van het nieuwe Troje. Hetbeleg van Oostende 1601–1604* (Louvain, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Rodríguez, *Ambrosio Spínola, primer marqués de los Balbases. Ensayo biográfico* (Madrid, 1905); Joseph Lefèvre, *Spinola et la Belgique (1601–1627)* (Brussels, 1947).