

A Brief Guide to the History behind Schiller's *Don Carlos*

What are the Spanish Netherlands?

The Spanish Netherlands comprised 7 provinces brought under Spanish rule through royal inheritance. The terms Brussels, Flanders and the Netherlands are used interchangeably throughout Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos*. For clarification, Brussels was the capital of the Flanders region. **Flanders** (translated as "flooded land") originally included parts of the **Netherlands, Belgium and France**. In his play, Schiller uses the Dutch struggle for independence as a dramatic precursor to the revolutionary democratic ideals of the Enlightenment.

The Netherlands chafed under King Philip's strict rule, the increasing religious pressure on Protestants and heavy taxation, leading to the Dutch Revolt in 1572. Queen Elizabeth I lent aid to the Netherlands in their war with Spain, escalating the tension between Spain and England. This conflict ultimately resulted in the disastrous failure of the Spanish Armada, the first major crack in the Spanish Empire. The Netherlands finally gained independence in 1648, following the Eighty Years' War with Spain.

The Spanish Inquisition

"God is Spanish and fights for our nation these days." –*Count-Duke Olivares*

The early history of Spain was long blemished by religious intolerance. By 1276 the Spanish finally succeeded in driving out the Moors, who had profoundly influenced Spanish culture; and by 1492 all Jews had been exiled. The **Spanish Inquisition** dates from 1478-1835 and is primarily associated with torture, execution and religious fanaticism. The **Auto da fe** ("act of faith") were massive festival-like events that incorporated public sentencing and penance, followed by either the reprieve of heretics or their march to execution. Despite the fact that executions were rarely performed publicly during the auto da fe, the term became synonymous with the burning of heretics.

Who is Don Carlos?



Schiller manipulated historical fact in service of dramatic intensity in *Don Carlos*, extrapolating the more romantic characteristics of the Spanish Hapsburgs. The truth however, was somewhat more complicated. For example, King Philip II had a reputation as a tyrant but also displayed moments of kindness. Historians claim he provided the wounded of the disgraced Spanish Armada with generous pensions.

In the play, Don Carlos is a handsome, well-meaning romantic lead oppressed by his brutish father. The *actual* Don Carlos (left) was indeed betrothed to Elizabeth of Valois (a daughter of King Henry II of France) who, for political reasons, wed Carlos' widowed father. But he was also mentally unhinged, physically deformed and chronically sick due to the inbreeding that was common among the royal courts of Europe.