

Iconoclasts Anonymous

Why did it take Historians so long to identify the Image-Breakers of 1566?

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This article asks why until the mid-twentieth century both Catholic and Protestant interpretations of the iconoclasm converged on the anonymising of the iconoclasts of 1566. It argues that, while a greater availability of sources, better source criticism and international debates helped eventually to give the iconoclasts a face, the main reason why it has took so long for the image-breakers to lose their anonymity was that it was in no one's interest to identify the culprits. For centuries, Protestants considered the iconoclasm an embarrassment, and preferred to dismiss its perpetrators as 'rabble', while Catholics in the Southern Netherlands tended to dismiss them as foreigners, manipulated by the nobility. Their anonymity was lifted through the intervention of German historian Erich Kuttner, whose main thesis was proven wrong, but at last triggered serious research into the identity of the iconoclasts, as well as alternative explanations of their motives.

'Iconoclasts Anonymous'. Waarom duurde het zo lang voordat historici de beeldenstormers van 1566 identificeerden?

Dit artikel werpt de vraag op waarom zowel katholieke als protestantse geschiedschrijvers tot de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw zo weinig belangstelling hadden voor de identiteit van de beeldenstormers van 1566. Hoewel bredere beschikbaarheid van bronnenmateriaal, betere bronnenkritiek en internationale debatten uiteindelijk hielpen om de beeldenstormers een gezicht te kunnen geven, betoogt dit artikel dat het eeuwenlang vooral in niemands belang was om de daders te identificeren. Protestantenvonden de herinnering aan de Beeldenstorm erg pijnlijk en maakten daarom anoniem arm 'gespuis' tot zondebok, terwijl katholieken in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden ze het



Hendrick van Steenwijck II (1580?-1649), *Church interior with Iconoclasm* (ca 1610-1630). Oil on canvas. Museum Prinsenhof, Delft.

liefst wegzetten als de buitenlandse werktuigen van opstandige edellieden. Hun anonimiteit werd opgeheven door de interventie van de Duitse historicus Erich Kuttner, wiens interpretatie weliswaar niet houdbaar bleek, maar wiens werk wel de aanzet werd tot serieus onderzoek naar de beeldenbrekers, en alternatieve verklaringen voor hun motieven.

In 2008 Museum Prinsenhof in Delft bought an unusual picture: Hendrick van Steenwijck II's representation of an episode of image-breaking that was painted some time between 1610 and 1630. The scene is surprisingly orderly. At the main entrance of a church, a gentleman sits on a pile of statues, and calmly directs the work done by five figures who are in the process of taking a saint's image down from its place, high up in the portal of a church. Everyone is dressed decently, and the men are proceeding with caution; one person is holding the ladder which another has climbed to put a rope around the saint – three others just starting to pull it down. Two little boys are, in the meantime, carrying smaller images to the pile.

So orderly is the scene that some observers have concluded that in the Dutch Golden Age, memories of the Iconoclastic Fury of 1566 were uncontroversial. Indeed, Van Steenwijck was evidently painting the scene as he or his patron would have liked it to be, rather than in order to evoke the much more chaotic, violent scenes of image-breaking that people had witnessed in 1566. Yet this did not mean that in the Republic of the Golden Age, the event was commonly recalled with pride. Had this been so, we would expect it to have been painted much more frequently than it actually was. There is only one other known painting of the iconoclasm, that by Dirk van Delen in the Rijksmuseum.¹ While many other canonic episodes from the Revolt were memorialised over and over again, apparently the iconoclasm was not central to the memory culture of the Revolt. This impression is confirmed when we extend our view to other media. Many individuals in the Republic recorded their war experiences, but of the many people who had been involved in the iconoclasm, no one left a record except to exonerate themselves. As we will see, Protestant historians tried to be as brief about it as they possibly could.² Catholics, while keener than their Protestant

1 Loet Schledorn, 'Kerkinterieur met Beeldenstormers. Hendrik van Steenwijck II', *Bulletin van de Vereniging Rembrandt* 19:2 (2009) 12-13; see also Marianne Eekhout, 'Material Memories of the Dutch Revolt: The Urban Memory Landscape in the Low Countries', 1566-1700 (unpublished doctoral dissertation Leiden University 2014) 35-36.

2 As was first noted in Alastair Duke, 'Calvinists and "Papist idolatry": The Mentality of the Image Breakers in 1566', in: Alastair Duke, *Dissident Identities in the Early Modern Low Countries*, Judith Pollmann and Andrew Spicer (eds.) (Farnham 2009) 179-197, 179-180. It was first published in: M. Bruggeman (ed.), *Mensen van de nieuwe tijd. Een album amicorum voor A.Th. van Deursen* (Amsterdam 1996) 29-45.

counterparts to evoke some memories of iconoclasm, nevertheless did so very selectively.

This article explores the consequences of this general embarrassment for historians' understanding of the identity and the motives of the image-breakers of 1566. It will argue that until the mid-twentieth century both Catholic and Protestant interpretations of the iconoclasm converged on the anonymising of the iconoclasts of 1566. This was not for want of evidence. The Council of Troubles tried and convicted more than 10,000 people; to do so, it collected masses of evidence – copies of which were not only kept in Brussels, but parts of which were scattered in local archives throughout the Netherlands. By the eighteenth century some of this evidence was being published, but even then, it took another century before serious questions were being asked about the identity of the iconoclasts, and yet another before their anonymity was lifted through the intervention of German historian Erich Kuttner. His posthumously published book on the 'Year of Famine' 1566 contained a thesis that was soon disproven, but that nevertheless triggered serious research into the identity of the iconoclasts, as well as alternative explanations of their motives. In the twenty-first century, their changed position was affirmed by the place given to the iconoclasm in the government-sponsored 'canon' of Dutch history, as a window onto the effects of the Reformation.

Eyewitnesses

From the start, the Iconoclastic Fury that broke out in August 1566 was an enigmatic event. Although many people had feared an outbreak of violence, no one in 1566, or indeed afterwards, really knew for certain how to explain exactly how a summer of open air sermons and growing Calvinist confidence suddenly turned into a violent purge of the churches of the Habsburg Netherlands. At the time, Catholics were astonished that the small groups of iconoclasts had been able to go about their work without being struck down, either by God or by the authorities. It made some of them wonder whether God was 'asleep'. But they also asked questions about the power vacuum and political paralysis that had prevented a focused response from the authorities, and raised critical questions about the role of the nobility, who at the very least should have anticipated the risk of violence, and had perhaps even organised it themselves. After all, some iconoclasts had claimed to be executing noble orders.³

3 Phyllis Mack Crew, *Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands, 1544-1569* (Cambridge 1978); Judith Pollmann, *Catholic*

Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635 (Oxford 2011) 16-17.

Nevertheless, there was much less public finger-pointing than one might have expected. Catholic priests rarely indulged in ‘I told you so-s’ towards the authorities, whose support they needed for other purposes; they were inclined to blame the sinful state of society for having provoked God’s wrath and were prepared to shoulder some of the blame themselves.⁴ A 1567 printed sermon by Bishop François Richardot about the image-breaking, for instance, was therefore devoted to a justification of the Catholic stance on images, without blaming the authorities.⁵ Local authorities took some action, but were busier containing the risk of further violence than in tracking down the culprits. When it became clear that the Council of Troubles, that had been set up by the Duke of Alba in September 1567, was indicting not only those who had themselves been involved in breaking images, but also all those who had aided and abetted them by remaining passive, it became vital for Catholic magistrates to exonerate themselves by presenting themselves as the victims of what had been unpredictable and uncontrollable crowd violence.⁶

Although the Reformed Churches, in the long run, also favoured an explanation that focused on random crowd violence, it took some time for this consensus to emerge. Initially, there was a sense of euphoria among Reformed communities, especially since by the autumn of 1566 the iconoclasm seemed to have secured them the right to preach or even have their own church buildings. One propaganda-print even celebrated the good work of image-breaking. Some proudly noted that image-breakers had operated in a disciplined manner and turned in damaged goods and precious metals to the authorities when requested to do so. Yet, as it became evident towards the end of 1566 that the political fall-out of the iconoclasm would be disastrous, it also became crucial for the Reformed leadership to distance themselves from what had happened. Preachers denied their own involvement and that of the consistories; Antwerp preacher Herman Moded published an Apology in which he condemned the violence and denied having encouraged the iconoclasts in the city.⁷ Others claimed the Reformed had been the victims of a conspiracy. In 1567 the Calvinist nobleman Filips van Marnix van St. Aldegonde argued in his *Vraye narration et apologie*:

4 Judith Pollmann, ‘Countering the Reformation in France and the Netherlands: Clerical Leadership and Catholic Violence 1560-1585’, *Past & Present* 190 (2006) 83-120, there 111.

5 François Richardot, *Het sermoon vande beelden teghen die beeldtschenders, ghedaan te Armentiers* (Leuven 1567).

6 Duke, ‘Calvinists and “papist idolatry”’.

7 Herman Moded, *Apologie ofte verantwoordinghe teghens de calumnien ende valsche beschuldighen ghestroeyet, tot lasteringhe des H. Euangelij, ende zijnen persoon door de vianden der christelijcker religie* (s.l. 1567).



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▲
Iconoclastic Fury by the Beggars. Anonymous engraving, 1566.
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

There are, however, strong suspicions and clear indications that it was the priests who started this as a device to set the magistrates against those of the religion (in the past they undoubtedly often did such things to cause new persecutions) [...] ⁸

The idea was repackaged in a 1568 pamphlet that was to have a long-lasting reputation in Reformed historiography, a list of ‘articles’ allegedly agreed by the Spanish Inquisition to bring the Netherlands to ruin. Article no. 7 constituted an agreement to hire image-breakers and ‘make sure the opposition are blamed for it’. ⁹ The articles were repeatedly reprinted in the seventeenth century and reiterated in Reformed popular historiography. Thus Adriaen Valerius, in the preface of his *Nederlandsche Gedenck-clanck* of 1626, argued:

For that purpose, then, they devised and agreed that they would in all corners of the Netherlands secretly place evil people, who would plunder, rob and break, so that (having accused the Netherlanders of causing this) they might send a large number of alien soldiers so as to lord it over them, and to bring them under the obedience of Spanish governors, who would possess it like the Spaniard possess the newly won lands of America. ¹⁰

Yet this conspiracy theory did not, of course, stand up to scrutiny. Too many people knew, after all, that it was the Netherlandish nobles who had been stirring up opposition, and some were undoubtedly aware that some consistories had been paying image-breakers. As Ramon Voges points out elsewhere in this issue, the most influential visual image of the iconoclasm, the print produced by the Protestant Frans Hogenberg in 1570 (see image on page 122), reflected the rather confused and contradictory Protestant interpretations: on the one hand, showing the iconoclasm inside the church as an orderly process (significantly also without any attacks on the Eucharist), but also pointing to evidence of plotting, theft, and drunkenness among the figures outside the building. ¹¹

It is no wonder, then, that in hindsight, Protestants were struggling over how to place the violence of the sixteenth century. Some saw the ‘evil people’ who had been punished by the Council of Troubles primarily as

8 Filips van Marnix van St. Aldegonde, *Vraye narration et apologie des choses passées au Pays-bas, touchant le fait de la religion, en l’an, M.D.LXVI*. ([Vianen] 1567). This English translation in E.H. Kossmann and A.F. Mellink, *Texts concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands* (Cambridge 1974) 80.

9 *Artyckelen ende besluiten der Inquisitie van Spaegnen om die van de Nederlanden te overvallen of verhinderen* (s.l. [1568]).

10 Adriaen Valerius, *Nederlandsche Gedenck-Clanck* (1626), P.J. Meertens, N.B. Tenhaeff, A. Komter-Kuipers (eds.) (Amsterdam 1942) 26-27.

11 See Ramon Voges’ article in this issue. Even so, the image was positive enough to be remediated in a commemorative medal that sympathised with the rebel cause, see Eekhout, ‘Material Memories’, 36.

victims. When he drafted his memoirs of the Revolt in 1602, Middelburg carpenter Pieter Joossen, for instance, included several stories about very old and very young iconoclasts, but with a view to explaining how unfairly these had been punished. His saddest tale concerned an old couple from Souburg who had been executed because the wife had used her slipper to strike an image of the Virgin Mary that she had seen lying about after the image-breaking, saying 'I have often done this in my heart and now I can do it with my hand'. When she was arrested, her husband was accused of having failed to do his masculine duty of restraining her, and the couple had been hanged together. Pieter Joossen recalled that he had seen their 'grey-haired bodies' exposed on the gallows.

Others tried to devolve responsibility to God, by arguing that the image-breaking could never have occurred so swiftly, and on such a scale, had it not been God's work.¹² Yet considering that the image-breaking had ended in temporary disaster for the Reformed cause with a thousand executions, the exile of tens of thousands, and the need to house, feed and pay an army of Spanish *tercios*, this position was, of course, not terribly convincing. Whatever one thought about images, the effects of the image-breaking of 1566 were difficult to interpret as a divine endorsement of the Reformed cause.

Some Protestants concluded, therefore, that it had been a mistake. In a song written by the early seventeenth-century Amsterdam poet and militiaman Gerbrand Bredero, it was argued that:

There is plenty that needs to be reformed
and God's temples must indeed be stormed, but spiritually.

Cast off the idols of evil habit, lust
of love and sorrow and pretense of rest

of whoring with Mammon or the stomach
of devil's service, or the old and bad abuse
of earthly goods [...]

Such church-breaking and tearing down of saints
is Christian, and anyone's free to do it
but it is easier to destroy the 'book of the laity' (i.e. religious images, J.P.)
than to cast off the inner idols in our selves.¹³

Bredero conceded that it might be a Christian thing to break an image, but added that this was to be done 'spiritually' – it was easy to destroy the 'books for the lay', the idols, in their material form; the real challenge was to destroy them in the spirit. He could no longer see the point of attacking wood and stone.

12 Crew, *Calvinist Preaching*, 180, citing Jean Taffin, *L'Etat de l'église* (Bergen op Zoom 1605).

13 'Een gerust leven', G.A. Bredero, *Groot lied-boeck*, vol. III, F.H. Matter (ed.) (The Hague 1979) 522-523.

Both in the Republic and in the Southern Netherlands, the first centenary of the iconoclasm in 1666 attracted attention among Catholics. In Antwerp, a procession was held to commemorate the centenary of the image-breaking, 'so that God in future would save them from such harm'. A prophecy for 1666, allegedly printed in Geneva in 1566, presaged divine punishment for the heretics.¹⁴ The Catholic author of the mocking ditty *True year of sorrow of the image-breakers, or the Feast of All Cats Mewing* thought divine retribution was already besetting the Dutch, who were suffering from plague and attacks from the English, and so were being punished for a century of heretical misdeeds.¹⁵ By contrast, only one Calvinist minister was inspired to publish a sermon celebrating the centenary of the preaching of the true word of God in 1666.¹⁶ For Golden Age Protestants, the image-breaking of 1566 was too complicated, and too wrought with controversy, to be recalled, let alone celebrated, as a central event in the Revolt.

This was probably one reason why seventeenth-century historians in the Republic devoted surprisingly little attention to the image-breaking; they were very brief, and very selective, about what had happened in the late summer of 1566. Pieter Bor devoted only ten pages in his three fat folio volumes to the image-breaking. Hugo Grotius limited his treatment of the subject to a mere two paragraphs.¹⁷ Historians did not hide their disapproval of the violence that had been deployed. In his very brief treatment of the Iconoclastic Fury, historian Pieter Cornelisz Hooft, for instance, conceded that some people of means had supported the iconoclasts, but concluded primly 'that the majority of un-Romish behaved sensibly, deploring that a proper objective was attained in such an inappropriate manner'.¹⁸ Another reason for the historians' silence on the subject is that such amnesia was officially encouraged. In the Pacification of Ghent of November 1576, in which the rebel and loyal provinces joined forces so as to present their demands for a total withdrawal of Spanish troops from the Netherlands, it was agreed that there

14 Jasper van der Steen, *Memory Wars in the Low Countries, 1566-1700* (Leiden 2015) 265; Den onvervalschten Hollandtschen waer-segger, dat is een oprechte almanach ofte voor segginghe voor 't jaer Ons Heeren 1666, eertijts ghepractiseert door den hoog-gheleerden D. Joannes Calvinis ('Geneva 1566' [1666]).

15 Anonymous, *Op-recht vveen-iaer vande beelstormers oft Alder catten miavv-feest* (1666) Also reissued in that year was *Op-komste der Nederlandtsche beroerten, invoeringhe der ketteryen, kerckschenderyen, ende grouwelycke moorden...* (Cologne 1666) by the Jesuit Augustijn van Teylingen.

16 Van der Steen, *Memory Wars*, 265.

17 Pieter Bor, *Oorspronck, begin ende vervolgh der Nederlandsche oorlogen* (4 vols.; Amsterdam 1679-1784) I, 82-92, discussed in Duke, 'Calvinists and "Papist Idolatry"', 180; Hugo de Groot, *Kroniek van de Nederlandse oorlog. De Opstand, 1559-1588*, Jan Waszink (trans.) (Nijmegen 2014) 46-47.

18 P.C. Hooft, *Nederlandsche Historien*, book III, in: Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft, *Alle de gedrukte werken, 1611-1738*, W. Hellinga and P. Tuynman (eds.) (Amsterdam 1972) I, 101.

was to be both an amnesty for all violent acts committed during the rebellion and ‘oblivion’. Everyone was to act as if the events of the troubles ‘had never occurred’. From November 1576, the fact that someone had taken part in image-breaking was therefore no longer accepted as grounds for taking legal action or excluding someone from their community. Finger-pointing was officially forbidden, and the public naming and shaming of individual image-breakers in one’s own community seems, indeed, to have been uncommon.¹⁹

Where memories of iconoclasm persisted in seventeenth-century Protestant discourse, this was mainly for the purpose of scapegoating. It was no accident, for instance, that the account of historian Pieter Bor focused on events in Antwerp and emphasised that the iconoclasts there had been inspired by a sermon of Reformed preacher Herman Moded. In the 1580s Moded had been at the center of a controversy between hardline Reformed believers supported by the Earl of Leicester and the ‘libertine’ government of Bor’s native city of Utrecht. In that controversy it was the ‘libertines’ who had prevailed, with the assistance of Holland and its advocate Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. It was thus unsurprising that Bor singled out Moded as one of those who had incited unrest among Antwerp’s ‘rabble’ in 1566.²⁰ Other histories also devoted disproportionate attention to Moded. In his 1666 account of the iconoclasm, Geeraert Brandt, for instance, included an extensive discussion of Moded’s apology, but mainly in order to show why it was not to be believed.²¹

Scapegoating Moded fitted a pattern in the Dutch memory culture of the Revolt, in which the responsibility for war crimes on the part of the rebels was assigned to individuals who had lost standing anyway, such as *geuzen* commander Lumey and preacher Pieter Dathenus. Yet it was also used to prop up a view of the Revolt in which religious fanaticism threatened the quest for liberty. Some argued that the main lesson that the Dutch Republic should draw from the events of 1566, was that they demonstrated the dangers of excessive power for the Reformed.²² We can see this line of reasoning very well in a history of Delft, written by the regent Dirck van Bleyswijck and published between 1667 and 1680.²³ Van Bleyswijck was pleased enough with

19 We know too little about the implementation of the Pacification, but see Henk van Nierop, *Het verraad van het Noorderkwartier. Oorlog, terreur en recht in de Nederlandse Opstand* (Amsterdam 1999) 214-232; Louis Sicking, *Geuzen en glippers. Goud en fout tijdens het beleg van Leiden* (Leiden 2003) 21-22, 27.

20 See Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Calvinists and Libertines: Confession and Community in Utrecht, 1578-1620* (Oxford 1995).

21 Geraert Brandt, *Verhaal van de reformatie, in en ontrent de Nederlanden: met eenige aantekeningen en aanmerkingen* (Amsterdam 1663) 428-432.

22 Judith Pollmann, *Herdenken, herinneren, vergeten. Het beleg en ontzet van Leiden in de Gouden Eeuw* (3 October lecture; Leiden 2008) 19-23.

23 Dirck van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge der stad Delft, betreffende des selfs situatie, oorsprong en ouderdom, opkomst en voortgangh [...], midtsgaders de stichtingen van alle hare publycke gebouwen [...]* (2 vols.; Delft 1667-1680) I, 150, 449. This text and its implications are discussed in Almut Pollmer, ‘Kirchenbilder. Der Kirchenraum in der holländischen Malerei um 1650’ (PhD Leiden University 2011) 209-226.

the Reformation, by which the ‘Romish had been pushed out of the churches’, so that the word of God could be preached ‘in all simplicity without any ceremonies or external trappings’. Yet, echoing Hooft, he disapproved of the means by which this had been done. He deplored the destruction of the art and images in the churches of Delft, which he blamed on the poor, the young and especially on the women of Delft, who had behaved as if they were ‘out of their mind and insane’.²⁴ The stars of Bleyswijck’s show were the urban authorities, who had done all they could to control disorder, to guarantee an orderly Reformation, and protect the liberties of minority faiths. To emphasise his point, and citing the usual examples of Moded and Dathenus, Bleyswijck contrasted the blessings such an orderly urban Reformation with the disastrous consequences that preachers’ meddling had had in the Revolt in Flanders and Brabant.²⁵ The iconoclasm of 1566 thus offered ample evidence, he concluded, of how necessary and useful it was for the authorities to retain a tight grip on the Reformed Church.²⁶

As time went on, sympathy for the iconoclasts dissipated ever further. An anonymous Dutch historian who, in 1743, published a sixteenth-century Catholic account of the early years of the Revolt, argued in his introduction that while the violent Catholic persecution of dissenters in the sixteenth century, of course, was to be condemned, there was a lot to be said for the ‘good use’ of images of ‘virtuous men’ and ‘instructive examples’; he believed it was

[...] certainly more useful in a Christian church than to decorate it with arrogant coats of arms with princely crowns, noble helmets and harnesses, swords and foils, which are just marks of pride about the deeds performed by of oneself or one’s ancestors [...]. Nevertheless these are suffered everywhere, and the ‘instructive examples’ are kept out of the Reformed churches, lest they might be abused; and although the abuse is not in the image but with those who are guilty of revering them, it has been found useful to banish them from the churches, regardless of any good they might do.²⁷

In this line of reasoning the iconoclasts of the sixteenth century became ever more culpable, and those who had resisted them every more laudable. The story continued to be told in this manner, for instance, in the late-eighteenth-century patriotic history for children by Jacobus Kok and Jan Fokke. The illustrating plate by Reinier Vinkeles showed how the Amsterdam image-breaker Weyn Ockers, yet another woman out of control, attacks an image with her slipper, while a gentleman is trying to restrain her.

24 Van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge der stadt Delft*, 1, 415.

25 *Ibid.*, 465-486, this quotation, 479.

26 *Ibid.*, 483-486.

27 ‘Voorbericht’ *Antwerpsch Chronykje, in het welk zeer veele [...] geschiedenissen, sedert den jare 1500. tot het jaar 1574 [...] omstandig zyn beschreeven, door F.G.V. (Leiden 1753) unpaginated.*



Reinier Vinkeles (1741-1816), *Image-breaking in the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam* (1566).
Weyn Ockers throws her slipper at a crucifix.
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

In the Dutch Republic, it was thus in no one's interest to identify who, exactly, the image-breakers had been. The Iconoclastic Fury of 1566 was primarily remembered to highlight the zeal of nobles and local authorities for curbing the violence and restoring order, and as the heroic counterpoint to the violence of the unruly youngsters, females and the poor. This line of argument not only affirmed the patriarchal social order, but also suggested that the Reformed and the rebel leadership were to be pitied for having attracted the blame for the events. Far from treating the Catholics as victims, these were accused of being vindictive and keen to turn the image-breaking to their own advantage, so as to destroy the Reformed.²⁸ An anonymous biographer of William of Orange noted in 1732 that considering their own involvement in the martyrdom of the 'living images' who had died for their faith, the 'Romish' should not make such a fuss about the image-breaking.²⁹

Catholic memories

Yet, making a fuss they were. While Protestants tried to ignore the events of 1566, many Catholics kept it on the agenda. For Catholics in the Northern Netherlands, the issue of iconoclasm was painful, since they associated it with the loss of church space after the Reformation, which they continued to deeply resent long after they had acquired alternative house churches.³⁰ The wealthiest among them were able to order paintings of their own churches that included the altarpieces and crucifixes that had been removed, a form of virtual repossession of church space.³¹ Some Catholics exerted themselves to document all that had been destroyed – so did humanist Arnoldus Buchelius, who recorded evidence of stained glass, inscriptions and objects in the churches of Utrecht, or Cornelis Plemp, who lovingly invoked the church interiors of his native Amsterdam before the Reformation, or the Gouda priest Ignatius Walvis, who wrote extensive histories of the churches in and around Gouda.³² Ruined

28 Jacobus Kok and Jan Fokke, *Geschiedenissen der Vereenigde Nederlanden voor de vaderlandsche jeugd* (25 vols.; Amsterdam 1783-1795) IV, 112.

29 [Pieter le Clerq.] *Het leven van Willem de i. prins van Oranje* (second edition; Leiden, Middelburg 1732) I, 500-501.

30 Willem Frijhoff, 'Katholieke toekomstverwachting ten tijde van de Republiek. Structuur en grondlijnen tot een interpretatie', *BMGN* 98:3 (1983) 430-459 DOI: 10.18352/bmgn-lchr.2416; Judith Pollmann, 'Burying the Dead, Reliving the Past: Ritual, Resentment and Sacred Space in the Dutch Republic', in: B. Kaplan et al. (eds.), *Catholic*

Minorities in Protestant States: Britain and the Netherlands, c. 1570-1720 (Manchester 2009) 84-102.

31 Pollmer, 'Kirchenbilder', 357-382.

32 On Buchelius, see Judith Pollmann, *Religious choice in the Dutch Republic: The Reformation of Arnoldus Buchelius (1565-1641)* (Manchester 1999); J.F.M. Sterck, *Oorkonden over Vondel en zijn kring* (Bussum 1918) 111-224, I am grateful to Carolina Lenarduzzi for drawing this text to my attention; see on Ignatius Walvis, *Goudsche en andre daartoe dienende katolijke kerk-zaaken (1521-1712)*, P.H.A.M. Abels, J. Hallebeek, D.J. Schoon (eds.) (Gouda 2012).

church buildings reminded believers of the fate of their churches and their images – they frequently continued worshipping there. Yet their memories focused on the buildings rather than on the individuals who had attacked, damaged and sequestered them.

In the Southern Netherlands, Catholic memories of the iconoclasm took on a different shape. In the seventeenth century, there appeared a considerable number of Catholic histories of the Revolt. Rather than focusing on the Revolt as a religious conflict, these presented it primarily as an act of rebellion. For that reason they did not seek to blame the Reformed, but concentrated on the pernicious role that greedy and ambitious Netherlandish nobles, and especially William of Orange, had played in fostering rebellion. Some of them believed that the image-breaking had been planned at the famous meeting of the nobles at Sint-Truiden in July 1566, while others argued that the nobles had lost control of the situation they had themselves done so much to create. Because the key objective of these historians was to prove that the noble justifications for their resistance against the king were no more than a smoke-screen for their selfish motives, they were much less interested in the role of the consistories. Why God had permitted such dramatic events to take place, they explained much as contemporaries had done; it was His punishment for a society that had become decadent.³³

At a local level, however, quite different Catholic memories of the image-breaking persisted. Memories of iconoclasm were potentially embarrassing for local communities in the South, for whom an unbroken history of Catholic piety was a source of local prestige.³⁴ Moreover, there too applied the oblivion clauses imposed by the reconciliation treaties that Farnese had agreed with surrendering cities and provinces in the 1580s. Yet, memories of iconoclasm proved very useful as evidence of the power of the sacred.³⁵ Side by side with the embarrassed silence about the complicity of the population of the Southern cities in the rebellion, memories of sacred resistance to iconoclasm abounded. Individual images had resisted attack both in 1566 and at the many subsequent occasions in the 1580s when images had been the target of Calvinist regimes and rebel armies. In Antwerp the statue of St. Willibrord had proved incombustible during the iconoclasm of 1566.

33 Surveyed and discussed by B.A. Vermaseren, *De katholieke Nederlandse geschiedschrijving in de 16e en 17e eeuw over de Opstand* (Maastricht 1941; reprint Leeuwarden 1941); see also Van der Steen, *Memory Wars*, 56-57, 81-97.

34 Eekhout, 'Material Memories', 183-190.

35 Judith Pollmann, 'Met grootvaders bloed bezegeld. Over religie en herinneringscultuur

in *de zeventiende-eeuwse Nederlanden*, *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 29 (2013) 154-175; Erika Kuijpers and Judith Pollmann, 'Turning Sacrilege into Victory: Catholic Memories of Calvinist Iconoclasm, 1566-1700', in: Éva Guillourel, David Hopkin and Will Pooley (eds.), *European Traditions of Revolt: Memories of Social Conflict in Oral Culture*, forthcoming.

When, during the Twelve Years' Truce, the statue returned to the Church of Our Lady, it immediately became associated with miracles.³⁶ In Mechelen, the relics of St. Rumbold that had been attacked by the English troops in 1580 were salvaged by the faithful and so survived the attack; it became the occasion for an annual procession.³⁷ Heretics had been unable to damage the Sacrament of Miracle in Brussels, and this made it an even better testimonial to the special relationship between the Habsburgs, the Netherlands, and the Church than it had already been.³⁸ Many churches cherished pre-Revolt images, some of them damaged, as evidence that it had been impossible to destroy them. Mechelen placed a series of damaged statues on its city walls – at a distance these looked unharmed, and they confirmed for all to see that Mechelen placed itself under the protection of its saints.³⁹

In a variation on this theme, there were many tales of the terrible fate that had struck iconoclasts in retaliation for their sacrilege. Iconoclasts had been maimed and killed by divine intervention, their houses burned down, their riches gone to dust. In these tales there was praise for those rare believers who had offered active resistance to the iconoclasts. Erika Kuijpers has shown, for instance, how the memory of nobleman Fery de Guyon, who had guided armed peasants into battle against the iconoclasts near Anchin, was treasured by his descendants.⁴⁰ While few others had taken up arms, many could pride themselves on having protected images and relics during episodes of image-breaking; such behaviour was evidence of having been a 'bon Catholique' in times of danger, and a source of much prestige also for descendants.⁴¹

When it came to the perpetrators, however, local histories in the South were consciously much more imprecise. No one wanted to recall quite how many local people had sympathised with the Reformed. Iconoclasts therefore were presented as nameless heretical strangers from Holland or of English

36 Marie Juliette Marinus, *De contrareformatie te Antwerpen (1585-1676)*. *Kerkelijk leven in een grootstad* (Brussels 1995) no. 155, 251; See for this and related examples also Eekhout, 'Material Memories', 71-79.

37 Joseph Jacques de Munck, *Gedenck-schriften dienende tot ophelderinge van het leven, lyden, wonderheden, ende duysent-jaerige eer-bewysinghe van den heyligen bisschop ende martelaar Rumoldus, apostel ende patroon van Mechelen* (Mechelen 1772) 219-234, discussed in the article by David de Boer in this issue.

38 Van der Steen, *Memory Wars*, 168-270.

39 See David de Boer's article in this issue.

40 Fery de Guyon, *Les mémoires non encor veues du sieur Fery de Guyon [...] contenant les batailles, sièges de villes, rencontres, escarmouces, où il s'est trouvé, tant en Afrique, qu'en Europe pour l'empereur Charles V & Philippe II roy d'Espagne, son fils de glorieuse mémoire*, P. de Cambry (ed.) (Tournai 1664), discussed by Erika Kuijpers, 'Between Storytelling and Patriotic Scripture: The Memory Brokers of the Dutch Revolt', in: Erika Kuijpers et al. (eds.), *Memory before Modernity: Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, Boston 2013) 183-202.

41 Kuijpers and Pollmann, 'Turning Sacrilege into Victory'; De Boer, 'Picking up the Pieces'.

or French extraction.⁴² As a consequence, the image-breakers were just as anonymous in the Southern Netherlands as they were in the historiography of the North, and they were foreign to boot. It was no wonder, then, that when the French came in 1795 and started to empty the churches and public buildings of the Habsburg Netherlands of their treasures, observers immediately noted the resemblance between the image-breakers of the sixteenth century and these latter-day ‘foreign iconoclasts’.⁴³

Giving a face to the image-breakers

In his Dutch History (*Vaderlandsche Historie*) of 1752, historian Jan Wagenaar summed up the state of the historiography regarding the image-breaking of 1566: Spanish and Catholic historians had blamed the Compromise of the Nobility or William of Orange. Wagenaar thought this was implausible, since so many of the nobles had been Catholic, and Orange himself had denied his involvement in his Apology of 1580. Yet, he also did not agree with the Protestants who, for their part, denied any complicity and just blamed it all on the mobs. Wagenaar had a new source at his disposal that suggested otherwise. In 1735 Amsterdam merchant Jacob Marcus had published the ‘verdicts’ of the Council of Troubles; from these, Wagenaar learned that ‘some of the Reformed, even some of the nobles themselves, who were later publicly charged, had a hand in this work, or have at least, considered it with approval’.⁴⁴ Marcus himself had already noted that quite a few distinguished Dutch families might find the names of their ancestors among those condemned. He warned that not all accusations should be believed, but said that even if they were true, there was ‘no shame’ in this anymore; indeed, such families could be proud to have served the patria. Not everyone took this so lightly. Two decades later historian Jona Willem te Water was dismissive of the noble involvement, arguing that the records of the Council of Troubles were not necessarily to be trusted, so that perhaps the nobility should be exonerated. Yet even he conceded that the image-breakers had to some extent been protected by the nobles.⁴⁵

42 Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, 173-174, 181; De Boer, ‘Picking up the Pieces’, 71-73.

43 Brecht Deseure, ‘Den ouden luijster is verdwenen. Geschiedenis, herinnering en verlies bij Jan Baptist van der Straelen (1792-1817)’, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 10 (2010) 517-555.

44 Jacob Marcus, *Sententien en indagingen van den hertog van Alba, uitgesproken en geslagen*

*in zynen Bloedtraedt [...] (Amsterdam 1735) xii; Jan Wagenaar, *Vaderlandsche historie*, vol. vi (Amsterdam 1752) 180.*

45 Jona Willem te Water, *Historie van het Verbond en de Smeekschriften der Nederlandsche Edelen, ter verkrijginge van vrijheid in den godsdienst en burgerstaat, in de jaaren 1565-1567 (Middelburg 1776) 1, 381-384.*

It was not only the role of the nobility that now began to change in the histories of 1566. As historians began to construct ‘national’ histories in the nineteenth century, the role of ‘the people’ in the Revolt also came to be construed in a different fashion. Liberal historian Robert Fruin dedicated a chapter of his 1859 *Voorspel van de Tachtigjarige Oorlog* to ‘the people’, discussing the enthusiasm among the common man for Protestant ideas, the willingness of many people of little substance to die for their faith, and the popular enthusiasm for the *preches* in the summer of 1566. Yet, he failed to explain the relationship of these heroic people to the image-breakers of 1566; ‘the dregs of the Protestants’, ‘mutinous’ people, ‘scum’, unspecified ‘bystanders’ and ‘fanatics’; the very same epithets that his predecessors had been using for three centuries.⁴⁶ In 1865, the Catholic historian W. J. F. Nuyens challenged the idea that this mob had been self-propelling. Nuyens revived the notion that there was a plan behind the image-breaking of 1566, but in a variation on the earlier Catholic historiography, shifted responsibility onto the plate of the consistories. He was dismissive of the Reformed and liberal scholars who had blamed the image-breaking on uncontrollable and spontaneous mob violence. ‘We, who live in the age of revolutions, know exactly what to make of the *élan irresistible du peuple*’, he sneered. To Nuyens, such *élan* was about as spontaneous as that of the hands of a clock. Instead he pointed to newly discovered evidence that involved the consistories, making it plausible to see the image-breakers as the willing or paid instruments of the Calvinists.⁴⁷

The new evidence that Nuyens used was mainly published in Belgium, where independence was followed by a surge of interest in the Dutch Revolt. This triggered the publication of a stream of source publications relating to the events of the Revolt, as well as interest in the many unpublished documents amassed in the archives of the Council of Troubles. It was this new material that also underpinned the work of one of Nuyens’ main authorities, Johannes van Vloten. Van Vloten, an explicitly secular historian, had in 1856 been the first scholar in the Northern Netherlands to discuss the Iconoclastic Fury at considerable length, and irrespective of reputations. Van Vloten was also the first to argue that the eagerness of contemporary sources to blame it all on the poor should perhaps not be taken as evidence of their central role, since they were easiest to scapegoat. While he explicitly raised the question of the identity of the iconoclasts and devoted full attention to the complicity of both the nobility and consistories, he found it difficult to give a face to the non-noble participants.⁴⁸ Just as in the seventeenth century, the image-breakers therefore mostly retained their anonymity.

46 Robert Fruin, *Het voorspel van de 80-jarige oorlog* (1859, reprint Utrecht 1986) 146, 160-161.

47 W. J. F. Nuyens, *Geschiedenis van den oorsprong en het begin der Nederlandsche beroerten (1559-1567)* (Amsterdam 1865) II, 100-145, there 141.

48 Johannes van Vloten, *Nederlands opstand tegen Spanje* (4 vols.; Haarlem 1856-1860) I, 81-100. This volume was also published as *Nederlands opstand tegen Spanje, in zijn beginselen, aard, en strekking geschetst* (1564-1567).

Disregarding Van Vloten's warning that the references to the poverty of the iconoclasts in the sources might just be a way of scapegoating, for twentieth-century scholars their poverty was to become a central theme. When working on volume III of his *Histoire de Belgique*, published in 1923, Henri Pirenne not only used the ever-growing range of new source publications on the Revolt, which offered much more precise evidence on the early phases of the Iconoclastic Fury of 1566. Pirenne also began to introduce some distinctions into his account; among the image-breakers, there were those moved by religious zeal, people who were 'infected' by the example of others, and the destitute who followed in their trail, to steal and plunder. Like many of those before him, Pirenne was short in his treatment of the fury of 1566 and did nothing to give the iconoclasts a face, yet he was the first to draw explicit attention to the references to unemployment, poverty and rising prices in the sources, and to the growth of a proletariat in the areas in which the iconoclasm had erupted. In other circumstances, he thought, the tension would probably have led to a *jacquerie*. However, this time the target had been religious, resulting in an attack on the churches.⁴⁹

But what had deflected the *jacquerie*? In the late 1930s the German socialist Erich Kuttner, who had fled the Nazi regime for the Netherlands in 1933, began working on a book that in 1949 was published posthumously as *Het Hongerjaar 1566* – in 1942 he was arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Mauthausen, where he died soon afterwards. The title of his book alone was something of a masterstroke, 'the hungry year' was a startling play on the phrase *Het wonderjaar*, which since the mid-nineteenth century had been used to describe the 'annus mirabilis' 1566.⁵⁰ Kuttner noted that the historiography on the subject of the iconoclasm of 1566 was dominated by long-standing points of disagreement about the motives and agency of the iconoclasts, but that not enough had been made of the many sources that noted their poverty.⁵¹ Kuttner was the first scholar to study the perpetrators of this violence in their own right. It prompted him to rethink the iconoclasm as a revolutionary effort by the 'Frühproletariat' of the sixteenth century that had ultimately failed because of the betrayal of the bourgeoisie.⁵²

49 Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique* (Brussels 1923) III, 465-474.

50 The only contemporary to use the term was the anonymous author of *Antwerpsch Chronykje, in het welk zeer veele [...] geschiedenissen, sedert den jare 1500. tot het jaar 1574. [...] omstandig zyn beschreeven* (Leiden 1753) 69; 'dwelck men hier het jaer van wonder om de grouwelijcke veranderinghe die men sach in het out Christen gelooff ende de groote muyterye dier gebeurde

onder den adel'. The person who popularised the term for 1566 was Hendrik Conscience in his novel *In 't Wonderjaar* of 1837 and its revised version *Het Wonderjaar* of 1843. Later users came to see the term as one of approval.

51 Erich Kuttner, *Het hongerjaar 1566*, Johan Winkler (ed.), with a preface by Jan Romein (Amsterdam 1949) 309-314.

52 As noted by Duke, 'Calvinists and "Papist idolatry"'.
 53

Unlike Van Vloten, Kuttner did not consider the possibility that witnesses blamed the iconoclasm on the poor to scapegoat them. Kuttner's version of events was traditional, in the sense that it concurred with the traditional belief in a masterplan such as had been sketched by Catholic historians before him. Yet the plan was very different from the way they had imagined it. In Kuttner's reading, bourgeois and noble Calvinists had manipulated the poor into action over the summer but had become so concerned when these began to dream of real social change that they had diverted the poor's attention to another target: the churches.

In hindsight, the people [...] understood that they should have forged a radical social and political revolution, that they should have disowned the propertied, killed the priests, and should have taken control of city and village. The iconoclasm had been no more than a superfluous and damaging distraction. The people understood it. But the historians of a 'purely religious' Revolt did not [...].⁵³

The reception of Kuttner's work was by no means universally positive, but whatever one's views about the book, it was evident that the only way to test his thesis was by finding out more about the social background of the iconoclasts. In the 1960s and 1970s, a range of scholars therefore combined a newly available list of names of those condemned by the Council of Troubles with local tax- and trial records to recreate the social profile of the iconoclasts in various localities. And although these studies highlighted a great deal of variation, they virtually all concluded that Kuttner had been just as wrong about the iconoclasts as all his predecessors. The image-breaking of 1566 had not been the work of a proletariat, but had involved people from all social groups, including master craftsmen and bourgeois citizens, nobles and former priests. By the time this work was summarised in Jozef Scheerder's authoritative synthesis, *De Beeldenstorm*, in 1978 it was evident that Kuttner's thesis was in tatters.⁵⁴

Having dismissed immorality, dearth and poverty as the main driving forces of the violence, scholars were left with the question of what had driven so many people of such different social backgrounds to become involved in an attack on the churches. For the first time, historians began to ask themselves in greater detail what had prompted image-breakers to act as they did. At first, the tendency was to take a closer look at Calvinist ideas and preaching, such as a very hostile Nuyens and a less hostile Van Vloten had already started to do more than a century earlier. In 1978, a study by Phyllis Mack Crew analysed all

53 Kuttner, *Het hongerjaar 1566*, 323-324.

54 Josef Scheerder, *De Beeldenstorm* (Haarlem 1978).

See also Henk van Nierop, 'De troon van Alva.

Over de oorzaken van de Nederlandse Opstand', *BMGN* 110:2 (1995) 205-223 DOI: 10.18352/bmgnlchr.3999.

the evidence on the content of the *prêches* and concluded that these had in no way challenged the social order:

In symbolic terms the *prêche* [...] was a statement of collective solidarity against the Inquisition and the foreign government, and a defence of the separate identity and authority of local magistrates, guilds and nobles. Both as worshippers and as citizens, the people would have liked real life to reflect the *prêche*; organized, hierarchical, harmonious, with the ministers and nobles as the guardians of the spiritual and political integrity of the country.⁵⁵

After decades in which Calvinists, throughout Europe, had been studied primarily as proto-revolutionaries, this was a hard-won insight, but in some ways it made it even harder to explain what had caused the image-breaking. Such an explanation required a rethinking of the religious objections against images. It was art historian David Freedberg who, in the 1980s, first encouraged scholars to take these objections seriously and offered an insight that would prove crucial: people who break images do not do so out of indifference, but precisely because they feel the images' power.⁵⁶

In the 1990s Alastair Duke first started applying this perspective not to what the iconoclasts said, but to what they did. Building on Freedberg's insights and the work done by Natalie Davis for France, he thematised the highly ritual and symbolic character of the violence: the taunting and mocking of images, the ritual punishment, the mutilation, drowning and burning to which images were exposed. He argued that such actions could be explained only by acknowledging that to iconoclasts, the breaking of images was a test that constituted demonstrating the power of God over Satan, by destroying the demonic images.⁵⁷ It was for this reason that the remains of the images were sometimes ritually disempowered even after they had been broken. In Doorn, broken saints' images were buried face down, mimicking the treatment of criminals and suicides, under the main walking route in the church. To break images was to fight the devil and carry out God's work. Anna van Brouchuysen, who in 1566 had been present during the image-breaking in the church of the Utrecht Franciscans, declared; 'that our ancestors had been possessed by the devil when they admitted such idolatry with the images'.⁵⁸ That is not to say that the iconoclasm had religious and

55 Crew, *Calvinist Preaching*, 177.

56 David Freedberg, *Iconoclasts and their motives* (Second Horst Gerson Memorial Lecture, University of Groningen; Maarssen 1985); David Freedberg, *Iconoclasm and Painting in the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1566-1609* (Oxford University D.Phil. thesis 1979; reprinted New York 1988).

57 Duke, 'Calvinists and "Papist Idolatry"'.
334-335.

58 For the Doorn burials, see Elizabeth den Hartog, 'Met voeten getreden. Beeldenstorm en kerkzuivering', in: *De Sint-Maartenskerk te Doorn. Vroeg renaissancemonument, bouwsculptuur en bouwgeschiedenis*, Gerard van Wezel (ed.) (Zwolle 2015) 38-48, 44. She also cites Anna from Brouchoven (46) from Marcus, *Sententien*, 334-335.

anti-demonic connotations only. More elaborately than Duke, Peter Arnade has recently analysed the practices and targets of iconoclasts in a variety of cities and has shown that iconoclasts often also had political targets in view with their attacks.⁵⁹ Yet it was the anti-demonic aspect of iconoclasm that Protestants themselves seem to have forgotten soonest and that has only now been fully retrieved.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In the last decades, much of the embarrassment evoked by the image-breaking of 1566 has dissipated. Novelist Louis Paul Boon popularised Kuttner's version of events in his *Geuzenboek* of 1977 and heroised the image-breakers. The iconoclasm has a central role in the story of the Revolt; churches advertise the remains of broken images, and they are put on display in museums. Art projects have started to use the term *beeldenstorm* in the sense of an 'artistic shake-up' or 'many images'. A Dutch advertising agency has named itself 'beeldenstorm' and promises help in 'solving marketing and communication problems [...] irrespective of *heilige huisjes* (sacred cows; literally 'holy houses')'. The term has obviously changed meaning and has become positive, although twenty-first-century outbreaks of image-breaking in Afghanistan, Mali, Iraq and Syria occasionally evoke negative memories of 1566, too.⁶¹ The changed status of the topic was evident when in 2006 a Dutch government committee selected the image-breaking of 1566 as one of the 'windows' for the 'Dutch canon', their overview of what every schoolchild ought to know. Clearly, the image-breakers are no longer the outcasts of Revolt history.

This article has shown that this rehabilitation cannot not be seen as the result of just the modernisation of the historical discipline. Of course, the greater availability of sources, better source criticism and international debates have helped to give the iconoclasts a face. Yet the real reason why it has taken so long for the image-breakers to lose their anonymity was that, from the start, there were political agendas that determined what historians have, and have not, wanted to know about the Wonder Year 1566. Even today, there are quite obvious questions about the Wonder Year and its aftermath that we have so far have chosen to leave alone, for instance about the smooth running of the machine that was the Council of Troubles, the collaboration of local witnesses and governments in the collection of evidence, and their role

59 Peter Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts and Civic Patriots: The Political Culture of the Dutch Revolt* (Ithaca, NY 2008).

60 Kuijpers and Pollmann, 'Sacrilege into Victory'.

61 See for these e.g. <http://www.beeldenstorm.org/> (an artists' workshop); <http://www.nvdb.nl/kunst-galerie-beeldentuin.html>; <http://www.beeldenstorm.nl/> (11 March 2015). See e.g. Ruud van Gessel and Jan Libbenga, *Beeldenstorm* (Amsterdam 2011).

in the distribution of guilt. The answers, when we get them, are not likely to be comfortable for those who like their Revolt heroic, yet they may help to disentangle further the enigmatic crisis of the *annus mirabilis* 1566.

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