

Iconoclasm as a War Strategy

Past and Present

A raging mob tore through the Low Countries in the middle of the sixteenth century. They destroyed church interiors, monasteries, chapels and abbeys, smashed statues from their plinths, slashed paintings with lances and left books and robes irreparably destroyed. The unprecedented destructive urge of the Protestant Reformation had enormous consequences for the religious and cultural heritage of the region. It also marked the symbolic beginning of a long struggle, which would ultimately lead to the redrawing of maps and a split from the Roman Catholic Church. The Iconoclastic Fury (Beeldenstorm) is an important episode in the history of the Low Countries, and one which shows striking parallels with more recent conflicts.

On 31 October 1517, Maarten Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses to the door of the Schlosskirche (All Saints' Church) in Wittenberg, an act that is widely regarded as the catalyst for the wave of reformation which spread rapidly through large parts of Europe. Charles V, whose dominions included the Low Countries, responded harshly and repressively, but ultimately unsuccessfully: he was unable to prevent the onward march of Protestantism. More and more people fell in with Luther's ideas and those of his successor, John Calvin. The Calvinists increasingly preached in public, and their sermons drew large numbers. On 10 August 1566, one such sermon in the village of Steenvoorde (now in Northern France, twenty-five kilometres from Ypres), led by a Protestant refugee who had recently returned from England, got out of hand. At the end of the sermon, twenty members of the listening crowd rampaged through a nearby monastery, and the first images were destroyed. In the ensuing weeks and months, groups of iconoclasts vandalised large numbers of church and monastery interiors throughout the Low Countries.

The aim of the first Reformers was to get rid of Church practices that they regarded as abuses: the selling of indulgences, the external display of



about football and a shareholder in RSC Anderlecht. He generally invests through the 3G Capital fund, managed by Jorge Paulo Lemann, Marcel Herrmann Telles and Carlos Alberto Sicupira, the Brazilians who owned brewery AmBev and became shareholders of AB InBev after the merger with Interbrew. Their investments are focused on the food and drink sector, including the American hamburger chain Burger King and ketchup manufacturer Heinz. Once in a while rumours circulate that they would like to make a bid for Coca-Cola. Evidently the sky is the limit.

The new beer conglomerate will be managed by the Brazilian Carlos Brito, CEO of AB InBev since 2005, who operates from New York, although the head office of the merged group will remain officially located in Leuven. Brito's business style is well known, involving cutting costs where possible. That's not likely to change, as the primary reason for the merger between the first and second largest companies in the beer world is to create added value for the shareholders. Those Belgian dynasties will reap the financial benefits.

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Translated by Anna Asbury



Jan Luyken, *The Iconoclastic Fury in Flanders and Brabant, 1677-1679*, etching © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

power and wealth and the encouraging of believers to worship icons. All that pomp and splendour distracted churchgoers from the true faith, which in the views of the Reformers should be based not on external appearances but on inner perception. They drew their inspiration from the second of the Ten Commandments: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth'.

The reason so many people were attracted to these Protestant preachers was not just the religious message of simplicity and piety that they preached. The movement undoubtedly had a base. Even more than the espoused doctrine, the masses blamed the Church and the state for the widespread socioeconomic misery throughout the region. It is not a coincidence that the Iconoclastic Fury began in the countryside, where people were living in poverty. The public rage stemmed mainly from their aversion to those in power: the Church of Rome and the strict, absolutist Spanish authority that was established in the Low Countries.

The reaction to the widespread destruction was not long in coming. After a short period of trying to appease the Protestants, the Spanish King Philip II dispatched the Duke of Alva with an army to restore order to the Low Countries and punish the guilty. The Iconoclastic Fury was therefore also the cradle of the Eighty Years' War, which ultimately led to the break-up of the Low Countries into a Dutch Republic in the north - the Republic of the Seven United

Netherlands - and the Southern Netherlands. Catholicism rapidly re-established itself in the south. Churches and monasteries that had been stripped bare were once again adorned with imagery, even more richly than in the past.

The history of Christianity is marked by a continual oscillation between revering icons (and thereby the external display of power) and striving for a pure, 'icon-free' Church. The history of iconoclasm is in fact by no means a purely Christian phenomenon: Islam and Judaism have also seen many iconoclasts in their history. The plundering of important cultural symbols and the destruction of monuments, books or works of art has always been an important element of warfare and, as recent conflicts have shown, that is still the case today. The destruction of the images of Buddha in Afghanistan by the Taliban (2001), or the widespread destruction of cultural heritage in Syria by Daesh, show that history constantly repeats itself. As in the past, today's iconoclasts are not protesting against the images themselves, but rather the value that their enemy attaches to them. By destroying works of art and precious objects, they hope to destabilise or bring down societies or religions. The link with the Iconoclastic Fury of 450 years ago is not difficult to see.

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A Daesh warrior destroying a sculpture on the city gate of the former Assyrian capital Nineveh