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### The Spanish Empire and “los tercios” as seen in Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s *El sol de Breda* (1998:2003)

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#### Abstract

Pérez-Reverte’s Alatrisme novels seek to educate young Spaniards about their Golden Age. In *El sol de Breda*, set in 1624-1625, Spanish armies fight to suppress the Dutch Protestant revolt. Narrator Íñigo is a teenage page to the experienced soldier, Alatrisme. Traditional commentators like Elliott already see imperial decline, whereas Kamen emphasises that the Spanish Crown could always raise loans and armies. Pérez-Reverte’s series favours the traditional interpretation. The narrator accuses monarchy, aristocracy and clergy of major failures of leadership. American silver brought only extravagance, the conquistador’s ‘get-rich-quick’ mentality rejected honest work and aristocratic favourites as ministers failed to halt the widespread corruption and incompetence, while Spain persisted in seeing itself as crusading guardian of Catholicism. By 1624 Spain’s crack regiments were a superb military machine. Soldiers mainly from Germany, Lombardy and Sicily fought brilliantly in Italy, France and Flanders in spite of appalling conditions – including the non-payment of wages, which triggered numerous campaign-weakening mutinies. Spanish military skill could not finally resist the humour and doggedness of the Dutch revolt: in 1648 the Provinces will gain independence from Spain. In 1634 the witness-narrator advises Velázquez on the huge court painting ‘The Siege of Breda’, also known as ‘Las lanzas’.

*El sol de Breda*<sup>1</sup> is volume three of six so far (2009) in the ‘Capitán Alatrisme’ series: *El capitán Alatrisme* (1996); *Limpieza de sangre* (1997); *El sol de Breda* (1998); *El oro del rey* (2000); *El caballero del jubón amarillo* (2003); and *Corsarios de Levante* (2006). At least three more novels are planned, with the last likely to be devoted to the battle of Rocroi in 1643.

The brief and uncritical treatment of the Spanish Golden Age in his daughter’s secondary school history textbook enraged Pérez-Reverte:

Estos libros los escribí para explicarle nuestra historia a la generación de mi hija [...] Con los Alatrisme yo quería contar la España del Siglo de Oro, que no está lejos de la

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<sup>1</sup> Arturo Pérez-Reverte: *El sol de Breda* (2003). Quotes are given in the body of this article as (*Breda*, page number).

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España de ahora. Somos como somos porque fuimos como fuimos: unos cabrones y unos tíos estupendos. Las dos cosas, luz y sombra. El primer libro era la política; el segundo, la Inquisición; el tercero, la Guerra de Flandes; el cuarto, el oro de América; este quinto es el teatro, y después habrá otro sobre la pintura. Poco a poco, voy dándole al lector un panorama completo de nuestra historia en aquel siglo que nos marcó tanto. Para lo bueno y para lo malo; y sobre todo para lo malo.<sup>2</sup>

The Alatraste novels, then, have a didactic purpose: to teach young Spaniards much more about the history of their Golden Age.

A great admirer of Alexandre Dumas’ D’Artagnan novels, Pérez-Reverte was familiar with the *folletín*, the highly popular novels serialized and published in instalments in nineteenth-century newspapers. Today’s equivalent ‘serials’ might be radio or television soap operas. The *folletín* usually had a strong central character and a story-line segmented into *entregas* or compact chapters with each chapter based on at least one major incident of high drama or suspense. *Folletín* readers demanded that the texts should be entertaining. Pérez-Reverte also aims to entertain.

*El sol de Breda* constructs a lively, sometimes brutally frank, critique of the Spanish government of the day as it deployed its crack fighting troops to protect the northern border of its European domains against Protestant rebels. The large historical concerns – the Empire and the crack regiments, “los tercios” – are projected through the lives of a small group of combatants – Íñigo Balboa, the young page learning the arts of war; his mentor, the experienced soldier and swordsman Alatraste; and the dozen or so other members of Alatraste’s squad – as they battle through one dramatic incident after another.

The story of *El sol de Breda* is told in first person voice by the fourteen-year old military page or squire, Íñigo Balboa. The time is the autumn of 1624 through to the spring of 1625. The place is Flanders, the Low Countries, roughly present-day Belgium and Holland. At that time Flanders belonged to the Spanish crown. Spanish-led Catholic armies are attempting to suppress a Dutch Protestant revolt against Spanish rule. The revolt, which began in the northern provinces of Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht, is now threatening the whole of Spanish Flanders. The Catholic armies are led by General Ambrosio Spínola, the Protestant forces by the brothers Maurice and Justin of Nassau. This war involves many set-piece sieges.

### **How stands the Empire in *El sol de Breda*?**

The novel deals thoughtfully with the troubled fortunes of Spain and its Empire, particularly as manifested in the Netherlands in the 1620s. Henry Kamen states that “in the 1570s Spain was sucked relentlessly into the maelstrom of the Netherlands”.<sup>3</sup> On the cost of the exercise to Spain, Kamen comments:

The cost to the empire in terms of men and money was in any case insupportable..., current annual income of the Castilian treasury was around six million ducats, while obligations came to eighty million. The current debt in Flanders [in 1574] was around four million, or two-thirds of all the available income of the government of Spain. To this one had to add the current costs there, over 600,000 ducats a month, the biggest

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<sup>2</sup> Entrevista con Arturo Pérez-Reverte: “El Dios reaccionario nos jodió vivos”, by Javier Valenzuela in *El País* (15 de noviembre de 2003). Text available at: [www.capitanalatraste.com/escritor.html?s=noticias/not\\_dios\\_reaccionario](http://www.capitanalatraste.com/escritor.html?s=noticias/not_dios_reaccionario)

<sup>3</sup> Kamen (2002:186).

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single burden on the treasury.<sup>4</sup>

Spanish involvement in the Netherlands, however, went far beyond a mere budgetary and organisational exercise.

State propaganda would have the Spaniards of the time believe that the King-Emperor’s policy of military suppression of Protestantism was being successfully conducted throughout his domains. Yet Pérez-Reverte’s description of war in Flanders shows the Spanish infantry under pressure: they are far from home, embedded within a hostile population, badly fed, driven close to mutiny by lack of pay and confronted by sometimes brilliant Protestant military commanders in charge of experienced Dutch, English and French troops. In spite of these challenges, the Spanish army was in 1624-1625 still capable of the most physically and militarily demanding tasks, still capable of achieving quite remarkable victories.

In this last comment, the key word may be “still”, for the Empire in Pérez-Reverte’s narrator’s view is beginning to show signs of fragility:

sacudiéndose [los holandeses] de paso el yugo de una monarquía castellana demasiado distante, centralista y autoritaria [...] y a ello hemos de añadir la decadencia de la propia España, donde un rey bien intencionado e incapaz, un valido inteligente pero ambicioso, una aristocracia estéril, un funcionariado corrupto y un clero por igual estúpido y fanático, nos llevaban de cabeza al abismo y a la miseria (*Breda*, 38).

The fictional narrator, supposedly speaking or writing somewhere between 1624 and perhaps 1659-1660, seems convinced of the reality of the phenomenon of imperial decline. Not all commentators on the period share this view. Pierre Vilar (1967) reminds us of Azorín’s opinion: “No hay tal decadencia.”<sup>5</sup> Much more recently, Henry Kamen (2002) argues:

My book presents the empire not as a creation of one people but as a relationship between very many peoples, the end product of a number of historical contingencies among which the Spanish contribution was not always the most significant. Historians of a previous generation preferred to focus only on the Spanish side of the story, and consequently ended up ensnared in imaginary and now wholly superseded problems such as the so-called ‘decline of Spain’. When the mechanisms of empire are defined clearly, ‘decline’ as a concept ceases to have any meaningful place in the picture.<sup>6</sup>

Towards the end of his substantial study, Kamen also states:

The traditional image of a world empire that one day was securely in the control of Spaniards and the next had slipped out of its control, is little more than fantasy born out of intellectual lethargy.<sup>7</sup>

And Colin Pendrill (2002) contends:

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<sup>4</sup> Kamen (2002:188).

<sup>5</sup> Vilar (1967:44).

<sup>6</sup> Kamen (2002:xxiv-xxv).

<sup>7</sup> Kamen (2002:489).

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The high quality of much of this artistic endeavour must argue strongly against the notion that Spain, as a nation or as a ruling class, was suffering a serious moral malaise [...]. What was true of art seems to be true of politics, the economy and the empire. In none of these spheres, individually or collectively, did Spain suffer serious and sustained decline during the seventeenth century. The Spanish empire was not notably diminished, nor was the power of the Crown in this period. Spain’s weaknesses were not new but largely those inherited from the previous century. It was weaker compared to other states in Europe but this was rather more to do with their rise than Spain’s decline. The notion of the ‘Decline of Spain’ with all its attendant baggage of moral decline, political disintegration and continuous trends should be discarded as an unhelpful presupposition in the analysis of Spanish society at this time. The impact of empire on Spain was very much more complicated and subtle than ideas about decline would suggest.<sup>8</sup>

Azorín, Kamen and Pendrill categorically refuse to accept that the seventeenth-century Spanish Empire was in decline.

Yet the traditional argument re imperial decline is sometimes depicted in truly powerful language, as when J. H. Elliott (1963; 2002) highlights a significant darkening of the national mood already in the 1590s:

a sudden catastrophe. In the last years of the century, the harvest failed [...], on the heels of dearth came plague [...] The great plague of 1599-1600 wiped out at a single blow much of the population increase of the sixteenth century [...] But the most serious long-term consequences of the plague may have been psychological rather than economic. Already, before it was struck by the plague, Castile was weary and depressed. The failures in France and the Netherlands, the sack of Cádiz by the English, and the King’s request for a national *donativo* in 1596 as bankruptcy struck, completed the disillusionment that had begun with the defeat of the Invincible Armada. Then, to crown it all, came the plague. The unbroken succession of disasters threw Castile off balance. The ideals which had buoyed it up during the long years of struggle were shattered beyond repair. The country felt itself betrayed – betrayed perhaps by a God who had inexplicably withdrawn His favour from His chosen people. Desolate and plague-stricken, the Castile of 1600 was a country that had lost its sense of national purpose.<sup>9</sup>

Elliott rounds off the section “Revival and Disaster” thus:

His [Philip V’s] first wife, Elizabeth of Bourbon, had died in 1644, and his only son, Baltasar Carlos, in 1646. His second marriage in 1649, to his niece, Mariana of Austria, brought him two sickly sons, of whom the second, Charles, by some miracle survived to succeed the father at the age of four. This last pallid relic of a fading dynasty was left to preside over the inert corpse of a shattered Monarchy, itself no more than a pallid relic of the great imperial past. All the hopes of the 1620s had turned to dust, leaving behind them nothing but the acrid flavour of disillusionment and defeat.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pendrill (2002:278-279).

<sup>9</sup> Elliott (1963; with revised Foreword 2002:298-299).

<sup>10</sup> Elliott (1963; with revised Foreword 2002:357-360).

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Matthew Restall counterbalances this:

Elliott has been writing about “the old conundrum of the ‘decline of Spain’ “with increasing skepticism since 1961 [...]; he recognizes here (in *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830*, 2006) that Spain sometimes stumbled and fell short of realizing its imperial goals not because of the old Black Legend reasons of poor government and poorer morale but because of the “scale and complexity” of its “grand imperial design”. His emphasis is ultimately on how much of that “imperial dream” was (surprisingly) realized [...]. These three lengthy syntheses by the eminent trio of Kamen, [Hugh] Thomas and Elliott thus give the impression that historians no longer see Spain as an early modern equivalent of Gibbon’s slowly declining Rome.<sup>11</sup>

The *Alatriste* novels prefer to present the reader with a traditional interpretation emphasizing the decline of the Empire.

**Evidence from the foundation novel *El capitán Alatriste***

*El capitán Alatriste*,<sup>12</sup> first volume in the series (1996), is set in Madrid in 1623, when Íñigo Balboa is aged thirteen and already attached to Alatriste as a page. Íñigo as narrator refers to the constant debates amongst Alatriste’s friends in *la taberna del Turco*:

sin olvidar un puntual seguimiento de las muchas guerras en las que había andado o andaba envuelta aquella pobre España nuestra, todavía poderosa y temida en el exterior, pero tocada de muerte en el alma (*Alatriste*, 58).

A little later the narrator reflects:

A don Francisco de Quevedo, eso pude entenderlo más tarde, le dolía mucho España. Una España todavía temible en el exterior, pero que a pesar de la pompa y el artificio de nuestro joven y simpático rey, de nuestro orgullo nacional y nuestros heroicos hechos de armas, se había echado a dormir confiada en el oro y la plata que traían los galeones de Indias. Pero ese oro y esa plata se perdían en manos de la aristocracia, el funcionariado y el clero, perezosos, maleados e improductivos, y se derrochaban en vanas empresas como mantener la costosa guerra reanudada en Flandes, donde poner una pica, o sea, un nuevo piquero o soldado, costaba un ojo de la cara. Hasta los holandeses, a quienes combatíamos, nos vendían sus productos manufacturados y tenían arreglos comerciales en el mismísimo Cádiz para hacerse con los metales preciosos que nuestros barcos, tras esquivar a sus piratas, traían desde Poniente. Aragoneses y catalanes se escudaban en sus fueros, Portugal seguía sujeto con alfileres, el comercio estaba en manos de extranjeros, las finanzas eran de los banqueros genoveses, y nadie trabajaba salvo los pobres campesinos, esquilados por los recaudadores de la aristocracia y del rey. Y en mitad de aquella corrupción y aquella locura, a contrapelo de la Historia, como un hermoso animal terrible en apariencia, capaz de asestar fieros zarpazos pero roído el

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<sup>11</sup> Restall (2007:2-3).

<sup>12</sup> Arturo Pérez-Reverte: *El capitán Alatriste* (2002). Quotes are given in the body of this article as (*Alatriste*, page number).

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corazón por un tumor maligno, esa desgraciada España estaba agusanada por dentro, condenada a una decadencia inexorable cuya visión no escapaba a la clarividencia excepcional de aquel hombre excepcional que era don Francisco de Quevedo (*Alatriste* 69-71).

The failure of monarchical leadership is highlighted:

Si en el casi medio siglo de reinado de nuestro buen e inútil monarca don Felipe Cuarto, por mal nombre llamado el Grande, los gestos caballerescos y hospitalarios, la misa en días de guardar y el pasearse con la espada muy tiesa y la barriga vacía llenaran el puchero o pusieran picas en Flandes, otro gallo nos hubiese cantado a mí, al capitán Alatriste, a los españoles en general y a la pobre España en su conjunto (*Alatriste*, 122).

The desperate yearning of the lower orders of society for gentility – and the related freedom from liability for tax – is mocked by the conde de Guadalmedina:

Aquí todo el mundo presume de lo mismo: de cristiano viejo, de hijodalgo y caballero. Ayer tuve que despedir a mi barbero, que pretendía afeitarme con su espada colgada del cinto. Hasta los lacayos la llevan. Y como el trabajo es mengua de la honra, no trabaja ni Cristo (*Alatriste*, 127).

The virtues of the ordinary people contrast with the weaknesses of the ruling classes and power-groups:

Otra hubiera sido la historia de España, de nuestra desgraciada España, si los impulsos del pueblo, a menudo generoso, hubieran primado con más frecuencia frente a la árida razón de Estado, el egoísmo, la venalidad y la incapacidad de nuestros políticos, nuestros nobles y nuestros monarcas (*Alatriste*, 131-132).

The second half of *El capitán Alatriste* is equally rich in powerful statements. The monarchy’s reliance on aristocratic favourites as imperial administrators is criticised:

ese buen y desgraciado pueblo español que siempre consideró a sus reyes los más justos y magnánimos de la tierra, incluso a pesar de que su poder declinaba, que el reinado del anterior rey don Felipe III había sido breve pero funesto en manos de un favorito incompetente y venal, y también pese a que nuestro joven monarca, cumplido caballero pero abúlico e incapaz para los negocios de gobierno, estaba a merced de los aciertos y errores – y hubo más de los segundos que de los primeros – del conde y más tarde duque de Olivares. Mucho ha cambiado desde entonces el pueblo español, o de lo que de él queda como tal. Al orgullo y la admiración por sus reyes siguió el menosprecio; al entusiasmo, la acerba crítica; a los sueños de grandeza, la depresión más profunda y el pesimismo general (*Alatriste*, 186).

When the King intervenes at the Madrid bullfight and skilfully dispatches a very difficult bull with a single shot, the young narrator believes that the Madrid public is easily led by empty gestures and that the King should rather be leading his armies (*Alatriste*, 188). The page looks into the future and

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sees himself as an officer in King Philip IV’s personal guard escorting the aged King at the signing of the Treaty of Bidasoa with France in 1659:

¡Cuán distinto de aquel otro Felipe Cuarto que yo mismo habría de escoltar treinta años después, viudo y con hijos muertos o enclenques y degenerados, en lenta comitiva a través de una España desierta, devastada por las guerras, el hambre y la miseria, tibiamente vitoreado por los pocos infelices campesinos que aún quedaban para acercarse al borde del camino! Enlutado, envejecido, cabizbajo, rumbo a la frontera del Bidasoa para consumir la humillación de entregar a su hija en matrimonio a un rey francés, y firmar así el acta de defunción de aquella infeliz España a la que había llevado al desastre, gastando el oro y la plata de América en festejos vanos, en enriquecer a funcionarios, clérigos, nobles y validos corruptos, y en llenar con tumbas de hombres valientes los campos de batalla de media Europa (*Alatriste*, 188-189).

So from and throughout the first volume of the series the adolescent narrator seems convinced of the reality of imperial decline.

Íñigo Balboa’s viewpoint and language, dated between 1623 and 1659-1660, are similar to certain combative voices of the Generation of 1898 cited by Herbert Ramsden. Unamuno, for example, argues:

Fue grande el alma castellana cuando se abrió a los cuatro vientos y se derramó por el mundo [...] La miseria mental de España arranca del aislamiento en que nos puso toda una conducta cifrada en el proteccionismo inquisitorial que ahogó en su cuna la Reforma castiza.

And Ganivet states:

Apenas constituida la nación, nuestro espíritu se sale del cauce que le estaba marcado y se derrama por todo el mundo en busca de glorias externas y vanas, quedando la nación convertida en un cuartel de reserva, en un hospital de inválidos, en un semillero de mendigos.<sup>13</sup>

The urge to comprehend a national history – in Unamuno, Ganivet and the fictional Íñigo – is very similar.

**Evidence from *El sol de Breda***

Further criticisms are voiced in *El sol de Breda*. Pérez-Reverte’s deep-thinking adolescent states:

Estancados entre reyes, aristócratas y curas, con usos religiosos y civiles que despreciaban a quienes pretendían ganar honradamente el pan con sus manos, los españoles preferíamos buscar fortuna peleando en Flandes o conquistando América, en busca del golpe de suerte que nos permitiese vivir como señores, sin pagar impuestos ni dar golpe (Breda, 38).

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<sup>13</sup> Ramsden (1974:29).

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Though expressed casually, this assessment encapsulates much of the mentality of the *Reconquista* warrior and of the *conquistador* in America: the reliance on a *golpe de suerte*, the acquisition through war of enhanced social status (and freedom from taxes) and the subsequent disinclination to engage in meaningful labour or industry. Íñigo’s peroration proceeds:

Ésa fue la causa que hizo enmudecer nuestros telares y talleres, despobló España y la empobreció; y nos redujo primero a ser una legión de aventureros, luego un pueblo de hidalgos mendicantes, y al cabo una chusma de ruines sanchopanzas. Y de ese modo, la vasta herencia recibida de sus abuelos por el rey nuestro señor, aquella España en la que nunca se ponía el sol, pues cuando el astro se ocultaba en uno de sus confines, ya los alumbraba por otro, seguía siendo lo que era sólo merced al oro que traían los galeones de las Indias, y a las picas – las famosas lanzas que Diego Velázquez iba a immortalizar muy pronto precisamente gracias a nosotros – de sus veteranos tercios. Con lo que, pese a nuestra decadencia, todavía no éramos despreciados y aún éramos temidos (*Breda*, 38-39).

Once again, the use of “todavía” and “aún” suggests that the young man believes that the Empire is at least enfeebled, possibly so rotten at the core that it can survive only for a few more years, at most a few decades.

**If imperial decline there be, from when might it date?**

R. Trevor Davis in 1957 set his *Spain in Decline* in the time-frame 1621-1700, dating from the start of the reign of Philip IV. Other evidence might suggest that Philip II’s Spain (1556-1598) was already sliding steadily into misery: bankruptcy in 1557; the confrontation with the *moriscos* in 1567-1570; his repudiation of all foreign debts in 1575; the hugely expensive failure of the Armada in 1588; bankruptcy again in 1596; and shortly after his death the re-stamping of the copper coins in 1603 (and in 1618, and in 1640). A literature specialist might comment on the very early emergence in the *Lazarillo de Tormes* of 1553-1554, in a world empire supposedly awash with gold and silver, of a new literary protagonist, the *pícaro*, a rogue living by his wits in the lowest depths of society. John Crow at one point pushes the Spanish ‘moment of truth’ further back:

As early as 1535 the greatest poet of the age, and one of the greatest soldiers, Garcilaso de la Vega, saw the writing on the wall when he wrote: “And everything is gone, even the name / Of house and home and wife and memory. / And what’s the use of it? A little fame? / The nation’s thanks? A place in history? / One day they’ll write a book, and then we’ll see.”<sup>14</sup>

J. B. Trend volunteered 1236 – repeat: 1236 – as a possible turning point: “In one way, the Spanish decadence began at the capture of Moslem Córdoba in 1236, and the political triumph of Castile was the economic defeat of Spain.”<sup>15</sup> Such a search for a tipping point could be endless – and endlessly instructive.

In Íñigo’s view, Spain in the early seventeenth century is already slipping into “la decadencia.” All the principal traditional power-groups and institutions of the state are failing,

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<sup>14</sup> Crow (1963:167).

<sup>15</sup> Trend (1940/1965:92).

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beginning with the monarchy, held in turn by Felipe II (1556-1598); Felipe III (1598-1621); Felipe IV (1621-1665); and the pathetically enfeebled Carlos II (1665-1700):

Porque mientras Spínola cosechaba victorias para un rey ingrato como todos los reyes que en el mundo han sido, otros segaban la hierba bajo sus pies en la Corte, bien lejos de los campos de batalla, desacreditándolo ante aquel monarca de gesto lánguido y alma pálida que, bondadoso de talante y débil de carácter, anduvo siempre lejos de donde podían recibirse honradas heridas, y en vez de aderezarse con arreos de guerra hacía lo para los bailes de Palacio, e incluso para las danzas villanas que en su academia enseñaba Juan de Esquivel (*Breda*, 106).

The Crown’s “failure of leadership” – Elliott’s phrase – after the death of Philip II in 1598 meant that the great commander Ambrosio Spínola

había en efecto de morir enfermo y desengañado por el pago recibido a sus trabajos; salario fijo que nuestra tierra de cañes, madrastra más que madre, siempre bajuna y miserable, depara a cuantos la aman y bien sirven: el olvido, la ponzoña engendrada por la envidia, la ingratitude y la deshonra (*Breda*, 107).

Pérez-Reverte’s narrator claims that a similar failure of leadership may be attributed to the aristocracy, the clergy and the “favourites” – los validos – selected by Kings Felipe III and Felipe IV to act as senior ministers. These “favourites” were: the Duque de Lerma (1598-1618); his son the Duque de Uceda (1618-1621); and the Conde-Duque de Olivares (1621-1643). As a result of sustained policy failures, honest labour is despised, preference is given to the fortune-seeking mentality of the *conquistador*. Disastrous economic policies – including the expulsion of the *moriscos* in 1609 – shatter agriculture and destroy any emergent industry: the whole country is reduced to beggary. Only American gold and silver and the pikes and guns of “los tercios” sustain Spain’s economic and military status. In Íñigo’s interpretation, behind this façade of apparent power there are but debts, hunger, rags and shadows.

In Spain’s imperial policy the “tercios” were used in Europe to confront the armies of the new religion, Protestantism. As a staunch Catholic and supporter of his King and his Counter-Reformation policies, the young narrator and the other infantrymen view the Dutch (and any other) Protestants as outright heretics and tend to use utterly abusive language about them. In this Íñigo and his colleagues are a product of Spanish culture’s ferocious hatred towards the new infidel, voiced sharply in a key verse of Quevedo’s *Epístola satírica y censoria*: “Pudo sin miedo un español velloso / llamar a los tudescos ‘bacanales’, / y al holandés ‘hereje y alevoso’”<sup>16</sup>.

Throughout *El sol de Breda* the Spanish soldiers use the term ‘heretic’ in an identically pejorative way: “Sólo el horror de un ataque inesperado y sin piedad podía quebrarles en un santiamén el espinazo a los herejes” (16); “la prédica de las doctrinas del hereje Calvino, al que mal rayo parta en el infierno o donde diablos se cueza, el hideputa.” (25); “mientras que luteranos, calvinistas, anglicanos y otros condenados herejes” (119); “Diríase que el diablo vomitaba herejes, pues era la tercera [vez] que nos daban carga.” (137); “Entonces le puse la punta de la daga entre las presillas del colete – “Nee [...] Srinden [...] Nee!” murmuraba el hereje” (142); “Los herejes nos cargaban también por delante” (149); “- Ahí está el hereje - murmuró Garrote.” (182); “Esos topes

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<sup>16</sup> In Cohen (1956:270-281 and in Trend (1940/1965:222-228).

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herejes tienen prisa - dijo.” (188); “ - ¿Hideputas - voceaba desesperado el menor de los Olivares – [...] ¿Herejes hideputas, así ardáis en el infierno!” (200); “a la oscuridad que se había tragado a los cuarenta y cuatro españoles que iban a intentar darles una mala noche a los herejes.” (225); “Murió en esos días Mauricio de Nassau, para duelo de los Estados y gran contento de la verdadera religión [...]. Mas el hereje, paladín de la abominable secta de Calvino” (231). The abusive term “hereje” is used often in the novel, with genuine malevolence, with “mala leche”. The word “hereje”, in fact, becomes an ideological instrument, a tool of religious and imperial policy.

Early modern European armies included soldiers from many areas and countries, with units in one army sometimes fighting their own countrymen in another. Even though by 1624-1625 there were alienated Catholic Netherlanders fighting within the Dutch Protestant forces, the dramatic needs of *El sol de Breda* require the ‘Spanish’ army to be seen as utterly ‘Catholic’ and the Dutch rebels to be seen as utterly ‘Protestant’. Kamen quotes from a letter of 1573 to Philip II from the Duke of Alba, the then commander in Flanders: “It is not the Turks who are troubling Christendom but the heretics, and these are already within our gates”.<sup>17</sup> Alba’s angry use of the word ‘heretics’ to describe the rebels in the Netherlands rings true in dramatic terms, and is so used in the novel.

This gross and abusive language is true to its time and place, reflecting the deep religious and ideological differences between Catholicism and the new Reformed religions. One quote in particular suggests the prejudiced Catholic perception of the huge differences between the Protestant preference for the making of a commercial profit and the Catholic preference for protecting ‘the true religion’ and their ‘reputation’ or honour:

No en balde los españoles peleamos siglo y medio en Europa arruinándonos por defender la verdadera religión y nuestra reputación; mientras que luteranos, calvinistas, anglicanos y otros condenados herejes, pese a especiar su olla con mucha Biblia y libertad de conciencia, lo hicieron en realidad para que sus comerciantes y sus compañías de Indias ganaran más dinero; y la reputación, si no gozaba de ventajas prácticas, los traía al fresco. Que siempre fue muy nuestro guiarse menos por el sentido práctico que por el orapronobis y el qué dirán. De modo que así le fue a Europa, y así nos fue a nosotros (*Breda*, 119).

The Catholic soldiers, in fact, were engaged in a Crusade.

Though the young page provides a solid focus for a coming-of-age novel, he seems perhaps just a little too young at this point in his development to have such a broad and deep understanding of Spain’s role in the world. Yet this concern with incipient or ongoing imperial decline gives a measure of conceptual density to the narration and makes for a memorable backcloth against which to set the action of the tale and the page’s individual development.

### **How stand “los tercios” in *El sol de Breda*?**

This novel also offers a penetrating insight into why between approximately 1490 and 1640 “los tercios” – the Spanish infantry regiments based not on conscripts but on volunteers – were feared all over Europe, why they were so vital to Spain’s imperial and religious dream.

The founding genius of “los tercios” was the Great Captain, Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba (1453-1515). In the first campaigns in Italy, he aimed for units of 6,000 men called “coronelías”.

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<sup>17</sup> Kamen (2002:188).

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Each of these was later split into two more manageable, independent, self-sufficient “tercios” of 3,000 men each. By 1534 each “tercio” had twelve companies, each of around 250 men, with six companies (1,500 men) of pikemen; four companies (1,000 men) armed with Romano-Spanish short swords, javelins and round shields; and two companies (500 men) armed with arquebuses, early long-barrelled guns fired by wheel-lock or matchlock. After constant refinements, by 1624 ‘captain’ Alatríste is part of a ten-to-fifteen-man “escuadra”, within one of the twelve hundred-strong “compañías” that make up the “tercio de Cartagena”, this regiment by now totalling some 1,200 men. Alatríste’s squad is very experienced and very skilled, able to turn its hand to virtually anything, so is kept under the direct command of Captain Bragado, often for special missions.

The Spanish Hapsburg Empire was able to raise loyal troops in all of its different possessions. Geoffrey Parker gives the Spanish, Italian, German, Burgundian and Walloon [Catholic Netherlanders’] contributions to the 1601 Army of Flanders: the Spaniards numbered 6,001 men out of 22,453, some 37.4% of the total.<sup>18</sup> Kamen says of the early Spanish “tercios”:

Spanish troops would continue throughout the reign of Charles V [1516-1555] to be a small but essential part of the Habsburg army. They were not necessarily better than other troops, but they had the advantage of continuity of service and better discipline, which meant that they had considerably more experience. Not without reason were they referred to in later years as ‘veterans’, a description they wore with pride. They constituted less than a fifth of the army that sacked Rome in 1527, and less than a sixth of the troops serving Charles in Germany in 1547. At the siege of Metz, which was directed in part by a Spanish general, the Duke of Alba, the Spanish detachments made up barely nine per cent of the infantry and just over three per cent of the cavalry [...] Spain’s effective contribution was always small.<sup>19</sup>

Kamen’s acute awareness of the “collaboration of many people from many nations”<sup>20</sup> to the Empire convinces him that

throughout the great centuries of empire Spaniards always remained a minority in the so-called ‘Spanish’ armies, which were composed largely of non-Spaniards [...] There were always more Italians and Germans than Castilians in the armies of Spain. Spaniards were seldom more than one-tenth of the total of troops that the government helped to maintain in Flanders, where the army usually consisted of infantry drawn from the Netherlands and Germany.<sup>21</sup>

Though the hard facts show that other ‘nations’ formed the bulk of the “tercios”, Pérez-Reverte in this novel is intensely focused on the specifically Spanish dimension, hence his focus on a Spanish regiment rather than one raised in Sicily, Lombardy, the southern Low Countries or the Hapsburg Catholic possessions in Germany.

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<sup>18</sup> Parker (2004:236).

<sup>19</sup> Kamen (2002:57).

<sup>20</sup> Kamen (2002:xxiv).

<sup>21</sup> Kamen (2002:165).

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**Why were “los tercios” so successful in so many battles on so many different terrains over nearly a century and a half?**

Their success may have come from their peculiar warlike character, thought by some commentators to date back to pre-Roman tribes and times. Abject poverty in fifteenth-century Spain bred tough men and tough soldiers. Spain learned special military skills from the German (and Swiss?) mercenaries who joined Christian Spain’s long war against the Muslims, a war that cultivated militant Catholicism and bitter hatred of the infidel and enemy. The enormous Spanish pikes, some “veinticinco palmos” in length, wrought havoc, especially when the Great Captain created a new style of fighting based on clever coordination of pikemen, swordsmen and arquebusiers. An ambitious, nation-forming and centralising monarchy nurtured a highly infectious dream of glory. Spanish society honoured the warrior: the poet Garcilaso was fatally wounded leading a “tercio” assault at Fréjus in 1536; Cervantes fought in the “tercios” in Italy and then against the Turks at the naval battle of Lepanto in 1571; the dramatist Lope de Vega sailed in the *San Juan* in *la Armada Invencible* of 1588; and the dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca may have actually fought in the build-up to the siege of Breda of 1624-1625. The soldiers in “los tercios” showed great devotion and sense of duty to their King and huge pride in his service. The soldiers, knowing that defeat on foreign soil meant virtually certain extinction, displayed ferocious, almost incredible discipline in battle. Their success may have come from several or all of these factors.

The “tercios” gave real military muscle to Spain’s claims to large swathes of territory in Italy, France and Flanders: they annexed Naples in 1503; captured the King of France at the Battle of Pavia in 1525; sacked Rome in 1527; destroyed the French army at St Quentin in 1557; and sacked Amberg (Antwerp) in 1576. As Spain made herself into the standard-bearer for the Catholic Counter-Reformation from 1544 onwards, the “tercios” stood powerfully against the Protestant Reformers in Northern Europe. The Spanish infantry were truly the cutting edge of Spain’s ambitions in Europe.

In terms of the physical appearance of the “tercios”, in chapter I (“El golpe de mano”) Pérez-Reverte describes the “tercios” cleverly and bravely seizing the town of Oudkerk. The Dutch citizens look with terror upon the Cartagena Regiment as it takes control of the town:

los soldados cetrinos, de piel tostada y menos altos que sus hombres flamencos, pero con poblados bigotazos, barba cerrada y fuertes piernas, que por allí andaban mosquete al hombro, espada en mano, revestidos de cuero y metal, tiznados de mugre, sangre, barro del dique y humo de pólvora (*Breda*, 21).

This initial physical description of the men of the “tercios” quickly broadens into a fulsome tribute:

Éramos la fiel infantería del rey católico. Voluntarios todos en busca de fortuna o de gloria, gente de honra y también a menudo escoria de las Españas, chusma propensa al motín, que sólo mostraba una disciplina de hierro, impecable, cuando estaba bajo el fuego enemigo. Impávidos y terribles hasta en la derrota, los tercios españoles, seminario de los mejores soldados que durante dos siglos había dado Europa, encarnaron la más eficaz máquina militar que nadie mandó nunca sobre un campo de batalla (*Breda*, 22).

The young narrator shows considerable awareness of ongoing developments in military equipment and tactics:

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Allí, la guerra, lejos ya la época de los grandes capitanes, los grandes asaltos y los grandes botines, se había convertido en una suerte de juego de ajedrez largo y tedioso, donde las plazas fuertes eran asediadas y cambiaban de manos una y otra vez, y donde a menudo contaba menos el valor que la paciencia (*Breda*, 13);

Aunque en ese tiempo, acabada la era de los grandes asaltos, con la artillería imponiéndose y la guerra de Flandes convertida en lentos asedios de minas y trincheras, nuestra infantería ya no fuera la espléndida milicia en la que fiaba el gran Felipe II (*Breda*, 22); and

Tras largas décadas de reñir con medio mundo [...], a España no le quedaría sino ver morir a sus tercios en campos de batalla como el de Rocroi, fieles a su reputación a falta de otra cosa, taciturnos e impasibles, con las filas convertidas en aquellas torres y murallas humanas de las que habló con admiración el francés Bossuet (*Breda*, 23).

Yet just as the end of the Empire may be in sight, so too the time of dominance of the “tercios” is seen to be coming to an end within the lifetime of the young page-narrator. In time he will see “ensangrentados los hierros de esas mismas lanzas en carnicerías como Nordlingen o Rocroi; que fueron, respectivamente, último relumbrar del astro español y terrible ocaso para el ejército de Flandes” (*Breda*, 153). W. C. Atkinson wrote in similar vein (1960):

From Flanders there came at this time perhaps the worst news yet, the catastrophic defeat at the hands of the French of a force of 20,000 Spanish veterans. Rocroi – May 1643 – was not just one defeat more: it was the final, irrevocable eclipse of that prestige of the Spanish tercios, which, first built up by Fernández de Córdoba in the Italian wars of Ferdinand of Aragón, had made them redoubtable ever since on the battlefields of half a continent. The repute had rested on the early adoption of new arms and tactics: it collapsed now on failure to meet the new tactics of the enemy, and the detail is symptomatic of that general hardening of the arteries which had overtaken a country wedded to a policy of standing still in a changing world. The Armada at sea had signaled the first waning of Spain’s imperial greatness; Rocroi on land closed the long chapter of its decline, and its moral consequences far outweighed the military.<sup>22</sup>

In another flash-forward Íñigo sees “el último cuadro de la infantería española en Rocroi, el día que el sol de España se puso en Flandes” (*Breda*, 85).

Years after Rocroi destroyed the myth of invincibility of “los tercios”, Íñigo, speaking possibly as late as 1659-1660, is still able to show enormous pride in the soldierly qualities of “los tercios”:

Pero, eso sí, hasta el final los jodimos a todos bien. Incluso aunque nuestros hombres y sus generales distaban de ser los mismos que cuando el duque de Alba y Alejandro Farnesio, los soldados españoles continuaron siendo por algún tiempo la pesadilla de Europa; los mismos que habían capturado a un rey francés en Pavia, vencido en San Quintín, saqueado Roma y Amberes, tomado Amiens y Ostende, matado diez mil

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<sup>22</sup> Atkinson (1960:186-187)

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enemigos en el asalto de Jemmigen, ocho mil en Maastrich y nueve mil en La Esclusa peleando al arma blanca con el agua hasta la cintura. Éramos la ira de Dios. Y bastaba echarnos un vistazo para entender por qué: hueste hosca y ruda venida de las resecaas tierras del sur, peleando ahora en tierras extranjeras, hostiles, donde no había retirada posible y derrota equivalía al aniquilamiento. Hombres empujados unos por la miseria y el hambre que pretendían dejar atrás, y otros por la ambición de hacienda, fortuna y gloria” (*Breda*, 23-24).

Though many volunteered for the “tercios” to escape hunger and poverty at home, life in the regiment was often harsh. At the duel with the Valencian, Alatraste is somewhat patchily dressed: “Estaba en camisa, y los zurcidos de ésta, sus calzones remendados y las viejas botas sujetas bajo las rodillas con cuerdas de arcabuz, no disminuían un ápice su imponente apariencia.” (*Breda*, 120) Asked later to represent the besieging army in a five-man contest, Alatraste is still ragged: “Para la ocasión, Alatraste adecentó sus ropas en lo posible: el colete de piel de búfalo disimulaba los remiendos de la camisa” (*Breda*, 205) and “espuelas, muy distintas a las que Alatraste calzaba en ese momento, con los pies envueltos en trapos para que no le asomaran los dedos.” (*Breda*, 209) Rain enters his cracked boots: “la humedad calaba hasta la médula de los huesos, reavivándole el malestar de las viejas heridas.” (*Breda*, 60) Food could be miserable: “Al mediodía, sus camaradas y él habían tenido pan con aceite de nabos y un poco de agua sucia como único yantar en las trincheras.” (*Breda*, 207) Lice were everywhere: “Mendieta estaba [...] despiojándose con solemne minuciosidad vascongada – en las trincheras, no contentos con vivir a su gusto en nuestro pelo y harapos, los piojos salían a hacer la rúa con mucha flema” (*Breda*, 181).

Living conditions for the Spanish infantry could be appalling. And a soldier was not always well treated when he retired:

que no pocos soldados viejos, mutilados o con largas campañas en sus canutos de hojalata, tenían que mendigar por calles y plazas de nuestra mezquina España, donde el beneficio siempre era de los mismos; y quienes en realidad habían sostenido con su salud, sangre y vida la verdadera religión, los Estados y la hacienda de nuestro monarca, resultaban con infalible rapidez muy lindamente enterrados u olvidados. Había hambre en Europa, en España (*Breda*, 70); and

antes de volver un día a su tierra recosidos de cicatrices, sin hallar cama en que acostarse, ni vino que beber, ni lumbre para cocer pan. Eso si no conseguían – la jerga soldadesca los llamaba terratenientes – siete lindos palmos de tierra flamenca donde dormir eternamente con la nostalgia de España en la boca (*Breda*, 60).

Many did die in Flanders, landowners – occupiers, at least – of a grave some “siete palmos” in length.

J. B. Trend, writing in 1944, highlights the pervasive sense of failure associated with the Spanish attempts to suppress the Dutch revolt in Flanders:

The Spanish proverbial phrase, ‘trailing a pike in Flanders’, brings with it the hopelessness and despair of defending a lost cause in a flat, waterlogged country – a cause which was never really theirs, but only their king’s [...] That, perhaps, is why the Spanish infantry never sang in Flanders. But the Dutch did. The greatest Dutch songs

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[...] belong to the time of the Spanish occupation. The Dutch National Anthem is a French tune turned against the Spaniards; other songs cover the Spanish soldiers, and their commanders, with ridicule. Ridicule was one of the great weapons with which the Dutch succeeded in driving the Spaniards out. The very name, Duque de Alba, has become a Dutch word, *dukdaif*: the mooring-post to which a Dutch bargee ties up at night. Flanders, then, left no impression on the Spanish mind beyond a grim duty done [...]. One picture remains: Velázquez’ ‘The Surrender of Breda’; otherwise Flanders is completely forgotten.<sup>23</sup>

In a similar vein, Colin Pendrill, reporting (2002) that “the rebels produced much exciting propaganda denouncing the duke [of Alba] and his soldiers as the embodiment of evil and wickedness”<sup>24</sup>, supplies a malicious parody of the Lord’s Prayer in honour of the hated duke:

Hellish father who in Brussels doth dwell / Cursed be thy name in heaven and hell; /  
Thy kingdom, which has lasted too long, be gone, / Thy will in heaven and earth be not  
done [...] / Our Father, in heaven which art, / Grant that this devil may soon depart; /  
And with him his Council, false and bloody, / Who make murder and plunder their daily  
study; / And all the savage war-dogs of Spain, Oh send them all back to the devil again.  
Amen.<sup>25</sup>

Trend’s use of words like ‘hopelessness’ and ‘despair’ is echoed in the economic and social evidence – and the interpretation thereof – presented by J. H. Elliott:

In 1597 Spanish merchants found it impossible to dispose of all their goods: the American market, the source of Andalusia’s prosperity, was for the first time overstocked [...] The goods which Spain produced were not wanted by America; and the goods that America wanted were not produced by Spain [...] Indeed, Castile’s economy was showing every sign of stagnation, and even, in some areas, of actual regression [...] The first point to strike contemporary observers was the depopulation of Castile and the decay of agriculture [...] There are many indications that the position of the Castilian peasant and agricultural labourer was deteriorating in the second half of the sixteenth century [...] The exodus to the towns gradually transformed Castile into a land of deserted villages, with tragic consequences for the country’s agrarian development [...], from about 1570 it began to be heavily dependent on grain supplies from northern and eastern Europe [...] The soil was poor, the climate unfavourable, and internal communications hopelessly difficult [...], a reluctance to invest money in public works; personal and municipal rivalries; and, ultimately, a deadening inertia, which crippled both the capacity and the desire to act [...], foreign travellers found the country as a whole backward, and uninterested in matters of scientific and technological concern. Already by the end of the sixteenth century many Spaniards seem to have been gripped by that sense of fatalism [...], it seems to have been an attitude of mind, rather than any technical difficulty, which stood in the way of economic advance [...] As a result,

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<sup>23</sup> Trend ((1944, 1967:69).

<sup>24</sup> Pendrill (2002:228).

<sup>25</sup> Pendrill (2002:229).

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agriculture languished and the economy stagnated.<sup>26</sup>

It hardly seems possible that such an enfeebled economy could sustain the vast costs of imperial armies engaged in long and bitter religious wars so far from home. Yet Kamen shows that collaborative support from all over the Empire and the silver pouring in from America were enough to sustain the armies of Spain.

The ill-clad, ill-fed, ill-paid “tercios” were magnificent soldiers. The novel’s descriptions of their seizure of Oudkerk (chapter I), their defence of themselves at the Ruyter mill (chapter V), “la encamisada” [the night sortie] in chapter VIII and their resistance to the final Dutch-cum-English attempt to break the siege of Breda (chapter IX) are very fine military achievements.

The action at the Ruyter mill is very impressive:

y nunca hasta entonces había visto [yo] a los españoles esperando a pie firme una acometida. Lo más particular era el silencio en que aguardaban; la inmovilidad absoluta con que aquellas filas de hombres cetrinos, barbudos, venidos del país más indisciplinado de la tierra, veían acercarse al enemigo sin una voz, un estremecimiento, un gesto que no estuviera regulado por las ordenanzas del rey nuestro señor. Fue ese día, frente al molino Ruyter, cuando alcancé muy de veras por qué nuestra infantería fue, y aún había de ser durante cierto tiempo, la más temida de Europa: el tercio era, en combate, una máquina militar disciplinada, perfecta, en la que cada soldado conocía su oficio; y ésa era su fuerza y su orgullo. Para aquellos hombres, variopinta tropa hecha de hidalgos, aventureros, rufianes y escoria de las Españas, batirse honrosamente por la monarquía católica y por la verdadera religión confería a quien lo hiciera, incluso al más villano, una dignidad imposible de acreditar en otra parte (*Breda*, 133-134).

Faced with almost overwhelming cavalry charges, the “tercios” stand firm: “Fue necesario apartar también los muertos españoles para restablecer en su sitio la formación: el tercio no había retrocedido un palmo de terreno.” (*Breda*, 144)

Such military skills were noted and praised by important foreign commentators:

Ya había escrito Nicolás Maquiavelo que el valor de nuestra infantería procedía de la propia necesidad, reconociendo el florentino muy a su pesar – pues nunca tragó a los españoles – «*que peleando en una tierra extranjera, y pareciéndoles obligado morir o vencer por no darse a la fuga, resultan muy buenos soldados*». Aplicado a Flandes, ello es del todo cierto: no pasaron jamás de 20.000 los españoles allí, y nunca estuvimos más de 8.000 juntos. Pero tal era la fuerza que nos permitió ser amos de Europa durante un siglo y medio: conocer que sólo las victorias nos mantenían a salvo entre gentes hostiles, y que, derrotados, ningún lugar adonde retirarse estaba lo bastante cerca para ir andando. Por eso nos batimos hasta el final con la crueldad de la antigua raza, el valor de quien nada espera de nadie, el fanatismo religioso y la insolencia” (*Breda*, 45-46).

Pérez-Reverte clearly shows Spanish brutality – *la furia española* – as the Spanish troops “entraron en el pueblo [Oudkerk] degollando a mansalva” (*Breda*, 15). He adds:

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<sup>26</sup> Elliott: (1963; with revised Foreword 2002:293-297).

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desde luego, ese primer momento fue una carnicería sin cuartel [...] y que ningún varón holandés mayor de quince o dieciséis años, de los que se toparon nuestros hombres en los primeros momentos del asalto, ya pelease, huyese o se rindiera, quedó vivo para contarle (*Breda*, 16).

Capture of a town normally gave the victors right to take booty, including possession of the bodies of the townswomen. The overall Spanish commander, keen not to alienate the Dutch civilian population further, orders that no abuse of women occur, which order has to be enforced by summary executions, for “ninguna bandera o compañía es perfecta” (*Breda*, 19).

The religious wars in Flanders were often pitiless, with little mercy expected or shown on either side. In chapter IX, for example, the English shout as they attack: “ – No quarter! [...] No quarter! – voceaban los hideputas” (*Breda*, 248). In victory the Spaniards showed the same ruthlessness:

Tocaba el tambor a degüello, sin compasión ni cuartel, iniciándose el alcance, la persecución al enemigo vencido [...] para correr tras los herejes, dando caza primero a los heridos y rezagados, quebrando cabezas, degollando muy a mansalva y sin usar, en suma, de piedad con ninguno; que si dura resultaba la infantería española en el asalto y la defensa, crudelísima era siempre en la venganza [...] Y el paisaje punteaba de millares de hombres corriendo a la deshilada, matando y rematando, saqueando a los heridos y a los muertos que yacían por todas partes, tan acuchillados que a veces la mayor tajada intacta era la oreja (*Breda*, 160-161).

A similar ferocity in battle is found in the religious wars of the time elsewhere in Europe – in Scotland, England, France and Germany.

If the Spaniards’ revenge in victory was utterly merciless, so too is Pérez-Reverte’s description of their behaviour:

Aquello era al mismo tiempo matanza, juego y locura, y la batalla habíase tornado matadero de novillos ingleses y carnicería de tajadas flamencas. Algunos ni se defendían, como el grupo que alcanzamos chapoteando hasta la cintura en una turbera y allá les fuimos todos encima, haciendo almadraba de calvinistas, envasándoles aceros y apuñalando de diestra a siniestra, sin hacer caso a sus súplicas ni a sus manos alzadas pidiendo misericordia, hasta que el agua negruzca se puso toda roja y flotaron en ella como atunes hechos pedazos” (*Breda*, 161-162).

The Dutch soldiers are caught in flight, beg for mercy and are still hacked to pieces in a blood-bath - just as the tuna are in ‘la mattanza’ off Sicily and in the equivalent ‘la almadraba’ off the south-west coast of Spain: the image is horrifying.

After the battle, the moment of high passion apparently over, the general slaughter is individualised and turned into an even more traumatising experience for the young page when he discovers a badly wounded enemy soldier and reports his find to Alatríste. The page seems genuinely anxious to help the Dutchman. Before Alatríste can take the page out of the room, Copons, another member of the squad, “apoyaba la daga en el cuello del holandés y lo degollaba de oreja a oreja.” (*Breda*, 171) The senior soldier, Alatríste, justifies this summary dispatch of the badly wounded Dutchman to the page, saying: “- Es cuanto podíamos hacer por él” and “- Cuando

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llegue el momento, ruega a Dios que alguien te lo haga a ti.” (*Breda*, 173) As his military education is gradually being completed, the page begins to see the world in a different and deeper and darker way.

Seen from the commanders’ perspective, the value-system and behaviour of veterans in the “tercios” could at times be almost unmanageable. At one point, the veterans, unpaid for several months, are asked to dig fortifications as a preliminary to payment of their unpaid wages, and many abreact: “que más valía a un hidalgo, pues todo soldado se apellidaba de tal, morir de miseria y conservar la reputación que deber la vida al uso de palas y azadones.” (*Breda*, 76) The veterans’ perception of themselves as ‘gentlemen’ who need to protect their “reputación” rather than ordinary workmen is repeated: “los soldados ostentaban muy a gala su condición de tales, decíanse todos hijosdalgos” (*Breda*, 88). This same rejection of peasant-like labours, labels and values is seen even in the face of certain death when the two soldiers to be executed on the parade-ground “pedían serlo por bala de arcabuz, como españoles y hombres de hígados, y no colgados como campesinos” (*Breda*, 81). These assumptions of gentility recall those comically demonstrated by the status-obsessed *escudero* in the Tractado Tercero of the *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1553-1554).<sup>27</sup>

Yet at the same time as they were enforcing the gradations of “tratamientos de cortesía” with canonical rigour, the “tercios” seemed peculiarly free of racial prejudice, free of the desperate Spanish obsession of the time with “purity of blood”. The Semitic features of the Olivares brothers in Alatríste’s squad “delataban a la legua unos bisabuelos todavía reacios a comer tocino” – which suggests Jewish or Muslim ancestry. Yet this issue was not at all important to the squad members, for “en asuntos de limpieza de sangre nunca entraron los tercios, al considerar que quien la vertía peleando, harto hidalga y limpia la tenía”. (*Breda*, 191-192). To be a soldier in the “tercios”, to fight, to spill your blood for your Spanish King and his Catholic religion, of itself erased all racial impurity and made your blood noble.

This cameo is somewhat strange when we recall the brutality of the expulsion of the Jews, the forced conversions, the rigour with which the Inquisition harried the *conversos*. 1626 saw the publication of Quevedo’s *El buscón*, and Paul J. Smith’s *Critical Guide* reminds us that the incredibly intelligent and gifted Quevedo was violently anti-semitic, as was virtually the whole society of the time:

Quevedo’s anti-semitism, like his misogyny, is at once traditional in the culture to which he belongs, and extreme by the standards of that same culture..., the persistence with which Quevedo mocks his characters for their ‘impurity’ of blood testifies to the virulent racism of the time. Those accused of being *conversos* [Jews who have converted to Catholicism] include Pablos himself, through his mother Aldonza; the school master Cabra, who dips bacon in the stew to prove his old Christian purity; and the landlord at Alcalá.<sup>28</sup>

While recognising that Alatríste’s squad is remarkably enlightened given the horrendous racial intolerance of the times, it is curious too that those same members of the “tercios” “no sufrían que les hablaran alto” (*Breda*, 265): they insisted always on being addressed as gentlemen and being invited politely to make war for their King.

Given this complex picture, it is not easy to assess how truly disciplined the Spanish regiments were:

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<sup>27</sup> Rico (ed.) (*Lazarillo de Tormes* (1987:99-102).

<sup>28</sup> Smith (1988:39-40).

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Todos eran veteranos y la disciplina ante la jerarquía militar les era natural; pero también les era natural la insolencia, pues el oficio de las armas a todos hacía hidalgos. Lo de la disciplina, nervio de los viejos tercios, habíalo reconocido incluso aquel inglés, el tal Gascoigne [...] escribía: «*Los valones y alemanes son tan indisciplinados cuanto admirables los españoles por su disciplina*». En cuanto a la arrogancia, [...] la opinión de don Francisco de Valdez, que fue capitán, sargento mayor y luego maestro de campo: <<*Casi generalmente aborrecen el ir ligados a la orden, mayormente infantería española, que de complexión más colérica que la otra, tiene poca paciencia*>> (*Breda*, 52-53).

Regarding the Spanish soldiers in Flanders:

la certeza de su valor y peligro, que junto al talante sufrido en la adversidad hacía el milagro de una disciplina de hierro en el campo de batalla, hízolos también poco suaves en otras materias, como el trato con los superiores, que debían andárseles con mucho tiento y mucha política; no siendo raro el caso en que, pese a la pena de horca, simples soldados acuchillaran a un sargento o a un capitán por agravios reales o supuestos, castigos humillantes o una mala palabra (*Breda*, 53).

The Spanish soldiers in the “tercios”, renowned always for their touchy and fiery – even explosive – character, had to be treated always by their commanders with the greatest respect and caution.

Collective indiscipline in “los tercios” extended to outright mutiny. Parker in both *The Army of Flanders*<sup>29</sup> and his essay “Mutiny and Discontent in the Spanish Army”<sup>30</sup> explored the many usually quite justifiable mutinies in Flanders, particularly up until 1607. Thereafter, improvement in conditions for the soldiers and the Truce of 1609-1621 reduced the frequency and scale of the Flanders mutinies. Pendrill supports Parker over the earlier period, citing five major mutinies in 1572-1576 and a further 37 in 1589-1607, the most spectacular that of 1576, leading to the terrible sack of Antwerp, or ‘Spanish Fury’ – *la furia española* – as the rebels chose to call it: “The Sack of Antwerp dealt a massive blow to Spanish fortunes in the Low Countries.”<sup>31</sup> Pérez-Reverte, familiar with this tradition of mutiny, includes a near-mutiny in *El sol de Breda*:

[El capitán] Bragado no había servido en Flandes antes de la tregua de los Doce Años, pero Alatríste sí. Y entonces los motines estaban a la orden del día. Ambos sabían que éste había vivido de cerca varios de ellos, al negarse las tropas a combatir por llevar meses y años sin cobrar la soldada; pero nunca contóse entre quienes se amotinaban, ni siquiera cuando la precaria situación de las finanzas de España llegó a institucionalizar el motín como único medio para que las tropas obtuviesen sus atrasos (*Breda*, 56).

Yet mutinous Spanish troops went willingly into battle:

y es sabido que siempre los tercios españoles tuvieron muy a punto de honra no exigir sus atrasos ni amotinarse antes de una batalla, porque no se dijera lo hacían por miedo a

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<sup>29</sup> Parker (2004:157-176 and 253-256).

<sup>30</sup> Parker (1979; 1990:104-121).

<sup>31</sup> Pendrill (2002:243).

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batirse. Incluso en las dunas de Nieuport y en Alost, tropas ya amotinadas suspendieron sus reclamaciones para entrar en combate. A diferencia de suizos, italianos, ingleses y alemanes, que con frecuencia pedían los sueldos atrasados como condición para pelear, los soldados españoles sólo se amotinaban después de sus victorias. (*Breda*, 57).

Pérez-Reverte, entitling chapter III “El motín”, recognises the huge dangers presented by mutinies, succinctly expressed in: “Los motines de Flandes, hijos de la indisciplina originada por el mal gobierno, fueron la enfermedad que minó el prestigio de la monarquía española.” (*Breda*, 82) Parker opens his “Mutiny” chapter with a quote from a letter of 1574 reporting the words of the new Governor of Flanders: “it is not the prince of Orange who has lost us Flanders, but soldiers born in Valladolid and Toledo whose mutinies have cost us money, confidence and reputación!”<sup>32</sup> The past tense of the unit “who has lost us Flanders” and the date of around 1574 suggest that in the high command some already saw Flanders as a lost cause. However many times mutinous Spanish troops called off a mutiny to re-join regiments and battles, “algunos de los peores saqueos realizados en Flandes lo fueron por tropas que buscaban satisfacción de los sueldos pendientes” (*Breda*, 83). Non-payment of wages de-stabilised and enraged the “tercios” and vastly weakened the whole Spanish military effort.

The narrator reports in counter-balance:

Que si es mucha verdad que nuestra pobre España no tuvo nunca ni justicia, ni buen gobierno, ni hombres públicos honestos, ni apenas reyes dignos de llevar corona, nunca le faltaron, vive Dios, buenos vasallos dispuestos a olvidar el abandono, la miseria y la injusticia, para apretar los dientes, desenvainar un acero y pelear, qué remedio, por la honra de su nación. Que a fin de cuentas, no es sino la suma de las menudas honras de cada cual. (*Breda*, 85).

The presentation of “los tercios” in chapters I to IX, then, is rich and multi-layered.

**What final vision or image are we given of “los tercios” in the “Epílogo” of *El sol de Breda*?**

In 1634 Íñigo, now aged 24, sees Velázquez’s unfinished painting of the surrender of Breda. Studying the foreground, Íñigo reflects:

lo cierto era que nosotros, la fiel y sufrida infantería, los tercios viejos que habían hecho el trabajo sucio en las minas y las caponeras, dando encamisadas en la oscuridad, rompiendo con fuego y hachazos el dique de Sevenberge, peleando en el molino Ruyter y junto al fuerte de Terheyden, con nuestros remiendos y nuestras armas gastadas, nuestras pústulas, nuestras enfermedades y nuestra miseria, no éramos sino la carne de cañón, el eterno decorado sobre el que la otra España, la oficial de los encajes y las reverencias, tomaba posesión de las llaves de Breda – al fin, como temíamos, ni siquiera se nos permitió saquear la ciudad – y posaba para la posteridad permitiéndose toda aquella pamplina: el lujo de mostrar espíritu magnánimo, oh, por favor, no se incline, don Justino. Estamos entre caballeros y en Flandes todavía no se ha puesto el sol (*Breda*, 262-263).

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<sup>32</sup> Parker (1972; 2004:157. See also Kamen (2002:189).

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This sombre reflection on the Spain of the aristocracy as opposed to that of the Spanish common soldiers – another version of “las dos Españas”? – is almost treason.

Whilst Velázquez chooses to fill the central foreground of his huge court painting with the generals appointed from the aristocracy, Íñigo prefers to remember the ordinary soldiers of the “tercios”:

Y nueve años después, en Madrid, de pie ante el cuadro pintado por Diego Velázquez, me parecía de nuevo escuchar el tambor mientras veía moverse despacio, entre los fuertes y trincheras humeantes en la distancia, frente a Breda, los viejos escuadrones impasibles, las picas y las banderas de la que fue última y mejor infantería del mundo: españoles odiados, crueles, arrogantes, sólo disciplinados bajo el fuego, que todo sufrían en cualquier asalto, pero no sufrían que les hablaran alto (*Breda*, 264-265).

Íñigo’s long service in the “tercios” gives him a very warm and very positive memory of the “tercios” as a wonderfully effective fighting force, almost – but not quite – to the point of romantic exaggeration. Without going quite so far, the reader of the novel may be tempted in future to see the Velázquez painting through the eyes of the fictional Íñigo – who supposedly suggested to the great painter that he replace the waving flags of his first sketches with the forest of pikes – “el bosque de lanzas disciplinadas” – that for so long, so bravely and so bloodily helped to sustain an Empire.

### **Conclusion**

This novel is a cleverly conceived and well delivered individual drama set against a densely portrayed military and historical backcloth. The novel, though, does present one or two difficulties.

When the narrator speaks as a mature man, addressing a group of shadowy listeners – a committee of enquiry? – possibly as late as 1659-1660, the reader may accept that Íñigo’s great knowledge of military life and of national and international affairs derives by then from his own rich life experience. When the narrator speaks in his adolescent voice, in the time of 1624-1625, the reader may choose to accept that the narrator has a mentor, ‘Captain’ Alatríste, who seems to know everyone of importance at the court in the rather small city of Madrid and that this mentor can therefore casually introduce the teenager to figures like the painter Velázquez and the poet Quevedo. Now and again, perhaps, the young narrator is just a little too knowledgeable, too well-informed, too mature in his opinions for one so young. And that this apprentice soldier should meet Calderón de la Barca, correspond with Quevedo, listen to the conversation between Alatríste and the great general Spínola and advise Velázquez in his Madrid studio on the composition of the Breda painting, might stretch credibility.

For Kamen and Pendrill the narrator Íñigo Balboa may be too easily convinced by the traditional reading of Spain’s imperial decline. Other critics, recognising the potential for mutiny and for ruthlessness within the “tercios”, might feel that the author Pérez-Reverte exaggerates or glorifies the role of these infantry regiments. The novel’s oft-repeated criticisms of the government of Spain in language that can be crude may for some readers prove excessive.

Whatever the reservations, Pérez-Reverte’s decision to set the learning experience of the adolescent narrator over the Flanders winter of 1624-1625 allows him to put forward a vigorous traditional critique of the Empire’s major military machine and the background system of the Empire. A Spanish-language reader who at the outset knows little of the Empire or of “los tercios” will by the Epilogue be much better-informed about these two major areas of interest.

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Beyond the novel, the Treaty of Münster in 1648 recognised the United Provinces – seven of the original seventeen provinces of the Low Countries – as a sovereign state: the Dutch Protestants had – finally – won their independence from Spain. In spite of Spain’s huge commitment of manpower and wealth over nearly eighty years, much of Flanders was lost. A fairly small, remote but obstinately dissident region had broken free of the greatest Empire of the time. On the one hand, Kamen argues firmly that:

the business [of empire] survived. It consequently makes little sense to talk of shortage of men or money. The empire never lacked men: its armies down to 1763 were always predominantly foreign armies. And it never lacked money: foreign traders and financiers – and even foreign pirates – continued to underwrite the empire’s regional economies even while they were trying to undermine the extent of control from Madrid.<sup>33</sup>

Restall interprets Kamen: “Only by 1763 were ‘the factors that produced the fragmentation of the empire’ fully in place.”<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, don Fernando Girón, a senior counsellor to Philip IV, is recorded as saying in 1623: “The war in the Netherlands has been the total ruin of this monarchy”.<sup>35</sup> So Pérez-Reverte’s narrator Íñigo Balboa – at what seems a moment of imperial triumph in 1625: the capture of the city of Breda signalled in Velázquez’s huge Court painting of 1634 – may be justified in spite of Breda (1625) and the future victory at Nördlingen (1634) in highlighting a slackening grip over Monarchy and Empire. Spain, for Íñigo, may be sliding into imperial decline.

A literature specialist drawn to the traditional reading might be tempted to round off by citing Antonio Machado’s “Castilla miserable, ayer dominadora, / envuelta en sus andrajos desprecia cuanto ignora”<sup>36</sup> or Quevedo’s “Miré los muros de la patria mía, / si un tiempo fuertes, ya desmoronados”.<sup>37</sup> Even if such support is not called upon, the reader may from this novel conclude that in what could have been a formula-driven exercise within an immensely popular series, Pérez-Reverte has delivered a truly gripping tale. Beyond the credible and convincing physical setting, story-line and characters Pérez-Reverte explores in considerable depth a desperately important phase of Spain’s history – the great ‘black hole’ that was Flanders – where perhaps “los tercios” and their and their Kings’ grand dream of Empire together, inexorably, began to crumble.

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<sup>33</sup> Kamen (2002:508-509).

<sup>34</sup> Restall (2007:2).

<sup>35</sup> Parker (1972; 2004:227 and Parker (1979:185)

<sup>36</sup> Part of "A orillas del Duero" in *Campos de Castilla*, in Antonio Machado: *Poesías* (Editorial Losada, Buenos Aires, [1943], 1962, 87-89)

<sup>37</sup> In Cohen (1956: 269) and in Trend (1940/1965:229).

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