

Isabella Hunt - "Spain 1474-1598"

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THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF PHILIP II'S FOREIGN POLICY

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

Philip ruled not only Spain, but also the Netherlands, the duchy of Burgundy, the Italian states of Milan, Naples and Sicily, and the empire in America. He had hoped to take over all his father's lands, but in the event the Habsburg hereditary lands, together with the Holy Roman Empire, went to his uncle Ferdinand. Foreign policy was not his forte. As Fernand Braudel points out: 'Despite his quite extensive travels - through Germany and Flanders, with visits to Italy and England, between 1548 and 1559 - he never managed to speak a modern foreign language.' Even in Portugal, the land of his mother and his nurse, he could understand but not speak the language. With his inheritance came the long-standing conflict with France, but this was to be the least of his foreign policy problems: the death of Henry II in 1559 brought to France half-a-century of weak or underage monarchs, and of religious strife. While Philip became involved, sending assistance to the Guise-led Catholic League, he faced much greater, and more expensive, problems elsewhere.

War in the Mediterranean occupied Philip's resources for the first half of his reign. As well as attacking Muslim strongholds in North Africa, Philip's fleet was victorious over the Ottoman fleet at Lepanto in 1571. Following the battle, the Turks concentrated their attention in the Balkans, and thus became the problem of Philip's Habsburg cousins. Trouble in the Netherlands proved to be much more

3. Discuss the significance of the Inquisition and of the *junta* in both bringing about and then dealing with the riots in Aragon. (4 marks)
4. Explain and comment on the points made by Muly (Source E). To what extent does this letter suggest that the new legislation was both unjust and unnecessary? (7 marks)
5. How far do these sources confirm or refute the suggestion that only in the last decade of Philip's reign did problems begin to surface? (8 marks)

Worked answer

1*. [Remember that brief but clear explanations are all that are required in these introductory questions; the purpose of this question is to ensure that you can disentangle Philip's marriages, and that you will not confuse his two wives called Mary.]

John III was the King of Portugal from 1521 to 1557; his sister was Philip II's mother.

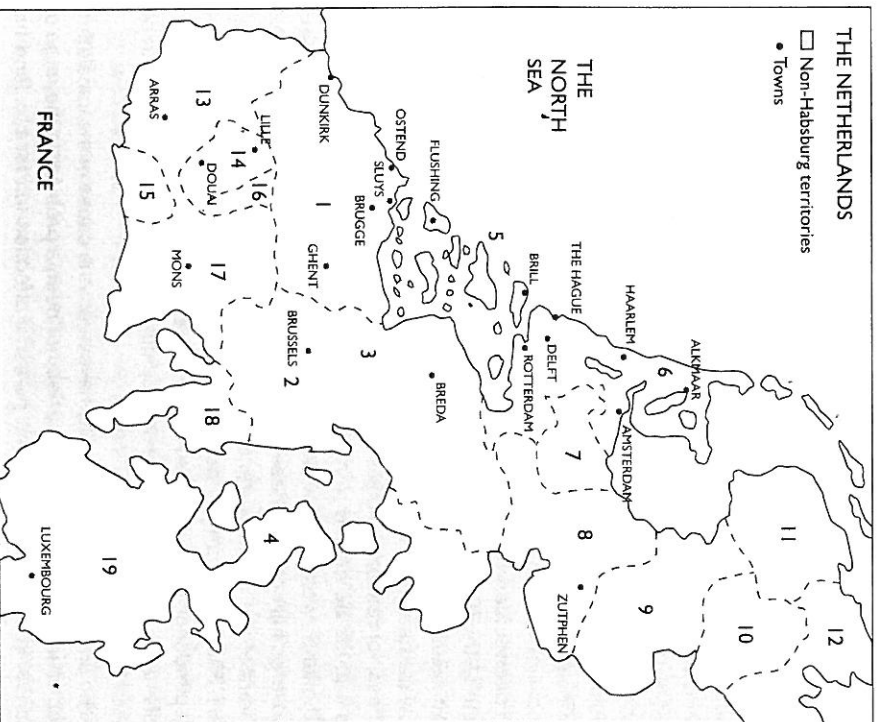
Prince John, his son, died in 1554, leaving a posthumous child, Sebastian, who came to the throne on his grandfather's death.

John III's daughter Mary married her first cousin Philip in 1543, dying in childbirth two years later at the age of 17.

intractable and therefore costly, in terms both of finance and of prestige. Organised rebellion began in 1567, and the rebels were strengthened by the Union of Utrecht of 1579, a Protestant reaction to the Catholic Union of Arras. In 1581, the Estates of the United Provinces deposed Philip II, and until the end of his life, Philip fought without success to restore his hold on his father's homeland. The Dutch were helped by the English Queen Elizabeth, and one of the most remarkable aspects of Philip's foreign affairs is the diplomatic revolution which turned England from allies into implacable enemies. Uneasy relationships during the 1550s and 1560s were worsened by Elizabeth's marital advances towards Protestant and even French princes, but the war was triggered by a combination of commercial disputes, the situation of the heir-apparent Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth's assistance to the Dutch. Open war broke out in 1585, and continued to the end of the reigns of both Philip and Elizabeth, despite the defeat of Spain's great Armada in 1588. Professor Geoffrey Parker argues convincingly that Philip's policies can be explained by what he calls 'prospect theory'. He says that 'not wanting to lose' is a much stronger motivation than 'wanting to win' and that individuals 'are disposed to pay a higher price and run higher risks when they face losses than when they seek gains . . . conflicts tend to be more common – and to last longer – when both sides believe that they are defending the status quo, because each believes it will suffer losses until it takes strong if not aggressive action'.² Certainly, the eventual twelve-year truce of 1609 embodied the demands which the Dutch rebels had made more than twenty years earlier, and continuing war against England impoverished Spain as much as it did England.

Protestant propaganda ensured, for many years, that Philip was anathematised. His three main antagonists, Henry of Navarre, Elizabeth I of England and William of Orange, became, as Henry Kamen points out, 'legendary heroes in the memory of their own people'.³ As late as 1856, the historian J. L. Motley memorably denounced him: 'If there are vices . . . from which he was exempt, it is because it is not permitted by human nature to attain perfection even in evil'.⁴ His lack of success whenever he confronted Protestant enemies, with their powerful propaganda machines, is one reason for such hostility. The two analyses which follow consider why the long drawn out war in the Netherlands resulted in failure for Spain, and the extent to which religion was a key element in Philip's conduct of foreign policy.

ANALYSIS (1): WHY WAS PHILIP II UNABLE TO RETAIN CONTROL OF HIS LANDS IN THE NETHERLANDS?



- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Provinces | |
| 1 Flanders (Dutch Speaking) | 8 Guelderland |
| 2 Brabant | 9 Overijssel |
| 3 Mechlin | 10 Drente |
| 4 Limburg | 11 Friesland |
| 5 Zealand | 12 Groningen |
| 6 Holland | 13 Artois |
| 7 Utrecht | 14 Flanders (French Speaking) |
| | 15 Cambrai |
| | 16 Tournai |
| | 17 Hainaut |
| | 18 Namur |
| | 19 Luxembourg |

Map 7.1 The Netherlands

The Netherlands were the only part of his far-flung territories that Philip II effectively lost during his reign, and yet at the time of his accession many would have said that these were among the most secure of his holdings. Charles I had regarded the Netherlands as his homeland, and it was the only province outside Spain in which Philip spent a significant amount of time: he was based in Flanders between 1555 and 1559, and frequently promised the States General that he would return, although he never did. Indeed, after September 1559, he never left the Iberian peninsula again. Perhaps more remarkably, he remained in central Castile, where messengers had the maximum distance to cover by slow land transport, rather than setting, for example, near the Atlantic or the Mediterranean coast, to facilitate communications.

Philip's view was straightforward: the Netherlands came to him in direct line from his father and grandfather. They were to be ruled, as they had been since 1506, by governors appointed by the King. And, as Philip wrote to the King of Denmark in 1586, referring to the widely accepted Confession of Augsburg (1555): 'if it is clear that other sovereigns do not allow their subjects to have a religion other than the one they themselves profess, for reasons of state as well as for religious motives, why should this attitude be denied to me?'⁵ Despite his confidence, by 1566 the Netherlands were in open revolt against his government, and Philip never recovered full control. These demands began with the issue of religious tolerance, but rapidly extended to an insistence on autonomy, and in 1581 Philip was formally deposed as ruler by the rebels. Although the independence of the northern Netherlands was not to be fully recognised until the middle of the seventeenth century, they had in fact ceased to be part of the Spanish empire.

The absence of their ruler may have been one cause of the escalating troubles in the Netherlands. This had not been a problem in the reign of Charles, in part because of the personal affection felt for him, and his willingness to respond to complaints, for example over the issue of taxation. But the main reason was that the governors appointed by Charles were able to rule unimpeded in his absence. Philip, as Geoffrey Parker has shown so lucidly, could not resist the urge to 'micromanage',⁶ while at the same time he failed to define the parameters within which his orders could be adjusted without consultation. This kind of government was impossible given the fact that 'Spain waged an unremitting struggle against the obstacles of distance'.⁷ For instance, when in 1573 Philip wrote a letter telling the Duke of Alba to 'gain days, hours and even moments in what must be done', the courier took six weeks to reach Alba in Brussels.⁸ Systems of government had been elaborated during Charles' reign. A *Reichkreis*, or central committee, of the seventeen

provinces had been formed in 1548, but each province remained very self aware, and the States General's legislation was not binding unless it was accepted by the Assembly of each. The Council of State, made up of nobles, meanwhile resented the lawyers and clerics who formed the royal civil service.

Religion was, however, the main pretext for anti-Spanish feeling. Charles had allowed established inquisitors at the diocesan level to deal with Lutheran heresy as early as 1522, but the followers of John Calvin proved much more intractable. The nobility of the Netherlands were, in the main, Catholic, but their education was Erasmian, and they were inclined to tolerance. They were also infuriated at the papal announcement of 1561. Aware that the Netherlands did not have enough bishops for efficient pastoral care, Philip had agreed the establishment of fourteen new dioceses, one of them an archdiocese. The fact that these appointments were made and announced without consulting or even informing the Council of State in the Netherlands was, at the least, tactless. Greater Catholic presence was needed, but these appointments came too late, and Calvinism had taken a strong hold in many of the cities of the Netherlands. In 1566 came the Iconoclastic Fury, when mobs attacked the churches and destroyed many of the images or, as they declared, idols, with which they were adorned. Such mob violence should have been quickly and cleanly put down, but the Spanish government did not have sufficient troops in the Netherlands. The reign had begun with a small standing army, but this had been disbanded for reasons of economy, and thus troops had to be brought from Italy or Spain.

Attempts to tax the Netherlands in order to cover their own defence, as well as their own policing, were also unpopular. Alba's attempt, in 1571, to introduce a new tax known as the Tenth Penny, was so unpopular that it was abandoned the next year. The rebels pointed out that it was a version of the Castilian *alcabala* – a powerful propaganda point. The new tax was one of the reasons why the *Gueux*, a group of Calvinist seamen, were able to seize and hold the port of Brill, from where they preyed on Spanish shipping. The second bankruptcy of the crown, in 1575, also had disastrous consequences in the Netherlands, since unpaid Spanish troops sacked Antwerp (the so-called Spanish Fury) ruining the prosperous town and alienating both Catholics and Protestants. Ortiz de Zúñiga, writing in 1677, described the struggle in the Netherlands as 'the graveyard of our armies, the swallowing up of our treasure, the interruption of our progress and well being'.⁹

The leadership of the local nobility was also decisive in stirring revolution. Although many of them were Catholic, they resented foreign taxation and foreign rule, and their attitude angered both Philip and Alba.

In 1568, two leading nobles, the Counts of Egmont and Hoorn, were executed by order of the so-called Council of Blood, and immediately became martyrs to the cause. Their place at the head of the burgeoning rebellion was taken by William of Nassau, Prince of Orange, who was to become the first Stadtholder of the United Provinces when they declared their independence at the Union of Utrecht in 1579. As early as 1567, it was suggested to Philip that the assassination of the Prince of Orange would be wise; while Philip rejected the idea then, further attempts were made and the successful assassin of Orange in 1584 was rewarded by the Spanish government.¹⁰

If the leadership of the rebels was divided, the leadership of the Spanish response was far from united and consistent. Philip at times wondered whether moderation would be better than stringency. By replacing his aunt Margaret of Parma with the Duke of Alba, he ensured a militaristic response to problems. Later, his appointment of the more moderate Duke of Medinaceli, to replace the Duke of Alba, was done in secret, with different instructions being sent by courier to Alba from those which Medinaceli himself received. And whoever was ruling the Netherlands, the advice, instructions and changes of policy came from Madrid with every courier. What did not come, however, was sufficient funds to deal with the rebellion. By December 1572, Alba owed his Spanish troops twenty months' wages, and it is estimated that the monthly cost of the fighting in the Netherlands in 1572–73 was 500,000 ducats.¹¹ Since the total revenue of the King amounted to 6 million ducats, of which half went on interest payments, it is clear that the cost of the war was crippling.

One reason for these costs was beyond the control of either side. The developments in military theory of the 1520s had resulted in radical changes in the fortifications which had been implemented by Charles, and indeed by Philip, to protect the cities of the Netherlands from attack by the French. The star-shaped fortifications, with their ravellins and overlapping fields of fire made cities almost impregnable, and thus sieges lasted much longer and were more expensive. Antwerp, for example, held out for a year against the might of Spain in 1584–85. When such cities did fall, the brutality ordered by Alba may have made some towns surrender, but it is also clear that others held out even longer, realising that they had nothing to lose. In contrast, we may note that Philip was not prepared to carry brutality to extremes. The suggestion that he should order the flooding of the entire coastal plain might have resulted in the ruin and capitulation of the rebels. But Philip refused to countenance the idea. Of course, since he was confident that he would regain full control, it was not in his interests to destroy the fragile ecology of these lands.

Philip was also unable to provide a North Sea fleet to counteract the *Genex* and their allies, the English, although from the mid-1580s, the Duke of Parma did begin to build up shipping.¹² Philip's main navy was based in the Mediterranean, and he could not move it from there. When the Netherlands began to force themselves onto his agenda in the mid-1560s, Philip was already engaged in extensive, and ongoing, commitments against the Turks and their allies in the Mediterranean. Even after Malta was relieved in 1565, the Granada revolt (1568–70) and the Lepanto campaign (1571) tied up Spain's resources, precluding any major switch of attention to the north. He was at the same time helping the King of France, his brother-in-law, against the Protestants. Possibly a more single-minded approach to the trouble in the Netherlands at that early stage might have saved them for him permanently. If Philip was giving assistance to the King of France, the Netherlands in their turn were getting assistance from other Protestant countries. Without the help, at first tacit and then open, of Elizabeth of England, the Netherlands would have been less able to resist and so to achieve victory. Elizabeth allowed refugees to settle, and to recruit in England. Her harbours became bases for Dutch privateers, and her own favourite, the Earl of Leicester, led troops against the Spanish in the Netherlands. When the hostility between England and Spain turned to open warfare, it could only help the cause of Dutch independence.

However much leadership, motivation and religious zeal the Netherlanders had, no-one really believed that they could resist the most powerful monarch in Europe, nor withstand the largest army and navy in the known world. And yet, when, in 1590, Philip resignedly told the Pope that he intended to extend tolerance to the Dutch, it was too late to regain full control over the northern Netherlands. The lands which became known as the Austrian Netherlands consisted of less than half the 'Burgundian lands' which Philip had inherited from his father. The determination of the Dutch, and their powerful foreign supporters, coupled with the fatal inability of Philip to delegate or to compromise, resulted in the loss of the richest part of the European empire of Spain.

Questions

1. Why did rebellion break out in the Netherlands by 1566? (OCR Summer 1998)
2. Why, despite the enormous odds against them, did the Dutch rebels secure, by 1609, substantial victory over Spain? (AEB Summer 1998)

ANALYSIS (2): TO WHAT EXTENT WAS RELIGION A MOTIVE FORCE IN PHILIP II'S FOREIGN POLICY?

As we noted in Chapter 6, this question would have appeared meaningless to Philip II himself, who regarded himself as the sword of God throughout his reign. His propagandists referred to him as King David, and the motto *Non sufficit orbis* ('The earth is not enough') was engraved on various pamphlets and placards. Philip's commitment to holding on to all his territories was derived partly from his conviction that he had been chosen by God to rule them. He always, however, had other motives for what he did, and there were occasions when his religious policies were compromised by other imperatives. In the American empire, for example, the missionaries were very much against the bondage system of the *repartimiento*, by which native Americans were allocated to labour for Spanish settlers. Philip nevertheless continued to authorise serfdom rather than risk rebellion from the *creoles*, the families of Spanish blood.

The constant war against the Ottoman Turks can be seen as a religious crusade. On the other hand, the security of the Mediterranean continued to be crucial to Philip, as it had been to his predecessors. Throughout his reign, therefore, Philip sought to preserve the shipping lanes between Spain and Naples, and to protect the grain and other ships of the western Mediterranean against the North African pirates and their Turkish overlord. Although the great naval victory at Lepanto in 1571 reduced the danger of a Turkish attack, it did not eliminate it, and Philip was compelled always to have troops and ships available in the Mediterranean.

In the rest of Europe, too, the requirements of religion often overlapped with the needs of other policy, and were on occasion completely irrelevant to Philip's endeavours. The taking of Portugal was a matter of dynastic ambition rather than of religion. When Philip's nephew Sebastian died in battle in North Africa in 1578, the throne of Portugal was disputed. Sebastian's uncle Henry, a Cardinal, claimed the throne and immediately tried to persuade the Pope to release him from his vows so that he could produce an heir. But he was already an old man, and was challenged by Anthony, Prior of Crato, the son of Henry's elder brother Luis. The problem was that Anthony was illegitimate, and the resulting uncertainty provided Philip with the opportunity to claim Portugal for his own. In 1580, with the death of Henry, Philip seized the throne. The Portuguese Cortes argued in vain that the female line (through which Philip claimed) was invalid in Portugal. Many powerful nobles, such as the Duke of Albuquerque, supported the Spanish claim, and Anthony, who had rashly sought refuge in Castile with his 'proofs of legitimacy' when his Uncle

Henry had rejected his claim, had no choice but to escape. The defeat, in 1582, of Prince Anthony's fleet at the Azores, despite the fact that some English ships were in support, followed by the recapture of the island of Terceira in 1583, established Philip securely on the throne of Portugal.

Religion was, however, the key issue in the Netherlands, as we have seen. The antipathy between the Netherlanders and their distant ruler was sparked and fed by religious differences, and Philip felt inadequately supported by the Pope as he struggled to save the souls of his Dutch subjects. The Pope was much more enthusiastic when it came to what Philip called the 'Enterprise of England', which adopted many of the characteristics of a crusade. In 1567, Philip went against established diplomatic protocol when he ordered the English Ambassador in Madrid, Dr Man, to cease his private Protestant worship and to accept Catholic Mass. The expulsion of Dr Man from Madrid is seen by some as the first stage in the English-Spanish hostility which was to last throughout the rest of the reign. The Pope had wanted to excommunicate Elizabeth I in 1563, at which point Philip had dissuaded him, arguing that Elizabeth, a woman and therefore weak, would eventually be persuaded to resume the practice of the true religion. He did not approve of the Bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, which eventually excommunicated Elizabeth in 1571, but by then it had become clear that only force of arms would rescue England from heresy. In that year Philip wrote: 'I am so keen to achieve the consummation of this enterprise, I am so attached to it in my heart, and I am so convinced that God our Saviour must embrace it as His own cause, that I cannot be dissuaded.'¹³ The Armada, when it finally sailed in 1588, had more priests than doctors, its banners blessed by the Pope and the confidence of Catholic Christendom behind it. Reaction to the bad news as it trickled in took the form of prayers and masses, as if a miracle would be granted if demanded with sufficient passion. Indeed, the English perceived the defeat of the Armada to be a Protestant miracle.

But neither the motive for, nor the defeat of the Spanish expedition of 1588 was entirely religious. Philip at first thought that he had a claim to the English throne, through his second marriage. While he soon recognised that this claim was not practicable, he began to support the ambitions of Mary, Queen of Scots, as soon as the death of her first husband ensured that her accession to the throne of England would not strengthen France. From 1567, when the Scottish Queen arrived in England, Philip was aware of the plots to overthrow Elizabeth in which she was involved. Whether he actively encouraged her treason, or merely hoped to benefit from it, is not clear. Certainly, when she was executed, Mary bequeathed her claim to the English throne to Philip. As well as his

hopes of claiming the English throne for himself, or at least for some other Catholic monarch, Philip also needed to prevent the English Queen interfering in his realms. England gave significant help both to the Dutch and to Dom Antonio, the claimant who resisted Philip's hold on Portugal. Elizabeth had also allowed, and indeed encouraged, her men to plunder the Spanish lands in America. The piracy of such men as Hawkins and Drake meant that huge amounts were spent in fortifying the towns of the West Indies, and Drake's circumnavigation in the late 1570s indicated that no part of the Spanish Main was safe from attack. In the end, both Drake and Hawkins were to die in an unsuccessful attack on the West Indies in 1595, but in the decades before they had done considerable harm to Spain's trade and treasure. But even in European waters, Spanish treasure was not safe from England. When treasure ships taking shelter in English ports were impounded in 1568, hostility was bound to grow.

Philip had every reason to be confident that he would defeat the English. After all, dynasties in England had, throughout history, been changed by foreign invasion, most recently in 1485. Philip's ships had been more than equal to theirs in the Azores in 1582–83, and since then he had been building up his navy, not least to ensure that he could continue to control the huge Portuguese empire. While his desperate finances could ill afford the great expense of the Enterprise, victory would solve so many of his problems that it was certainly worth the expenditure. The occupation of England would, at a stroke, settle the revolt in the Netherlands; it would ensure that the Catholics remained dominant in France; it would safeguard Spain's worldwide trade for ever. Much has been written about the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The classic work by Garrett Mattingly¹⁴ explains in detail the tactics which led to English victory, but more recently Geoffrey Parker¹⁵ has argued that Philip's methods and interference meant that the entire plan was unworkable. A plan involving a combined assault by ships from Spain and troops for the Netherlands requires, at the least, modern rapid communications and reliable and trusting liaison between commanders. Despite the terrible losses sustained by the 1588 fleet, Philip could not believe that God had forsaken him: further unsuccessful attempts against England continued until his death in 1598.

Philip always had both secular and religious reasons for his foreign policies. It seems, however, that the conviction that he was doing the will of God may have persuaded him to continue with policies beyond the stage when compromise would have been both wiser and more economically sound. His lack of success, seen by his enemies as proof that God was not on his side, may be more reasonably explained by a

consideration of the mismatch between his resources and working methods and the problems which confronted him.

Questions

1. How accurate is it to describe Philip II as the last of the crusading kings?
2. Why, in the reign of Elizabeth, did the Spanish come to replace the French as the greatest foreign threat to the interests of the English nation? (EDEXCEL Summer 1998)

SOURCES

1. PHILIP'S METHODS AND IDEAS

Source A: the Duke of Alba, writing to Philip's secretary, Gabriel Zayas, in February 1573.

I beat my head against the wall when I hear them talk of the cost here! It is not the Turks who are troubling Christendom, but the heretics, and these are already within our gates . . . for the love of God, ask for the new supplies that I have detailed to His Majesty, because what is at stake is nothing less than the survival of his states.

Source B: Louis de Requesens describes the Netherlands' situation in January 1575.

I shall say only that matters here are in such a terrible state, and so impossible to sustain, that we have to give in to all they want, so long as religion is excepted. And we will have to act so quickly that there will be no time to consult. . . . I agree that Your Majesty should send someone of the blood royal, remove all foreigners, and restore the old form of government.

Source C: Philip in a letter to Requesens, October 1575.

With such difference of opinions I have found myself very confused. And since I don't know the truth of what is going on there, I neither know the solution that is necessary, nor what to think. It seems to me that the most reliable is to believe neither one side nor the other, since I think that both go to extremes. I think that the best view to take, though with great discretion, is in the middle.