

**The Armada**

**Timeline**

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| **Date** | **Event** | **Significance** |
| **1580** | **1st Acquisition of Portugal** | **Philip now had more navy and coastline and could consider attacking England – sent a threatening letter to his ambassador in England.** |
|  | **1584 – leader of the Dutch rebellion, William of Orange assassinated.**  **Philip appoints Santa Cruz as his “master of the sea”** | **Philip joins the Catholic League; signs the Treaty of Joinville.**  **Brilliant naval admiral** |
|  | **1585 – 20th August - Treaty of Nonsuch English sending aid to the Dutch rebels**  **17th August the Spanish retook Antwerp**  **7th October – Drake attacked Galicia** | **Earl of Leicester led English5,000 forces to the assistance of the Dutch rebels.** |
|  | **1587 – Execution of Mary Queen of Scots**  **Drake “singeing the king of Spain’s beard”.** | **She has left her claim to the throne of England to Philip in her will.**  **Francis Drake raids Cadiz and other coastal towns in Spain, sinking and capturing around 30 Spanish ships and destroying supplies, delaying the Armada preparations for nearly a whole year!** |
|  | **1588 February – Santa Cruz died and was replaced by the Duke of Medina Sidonia.** | **The Duke was of very high rank so could ensure everyone obeyed his instructions, but he was not an experienced sailor. He was however in charge of many that were.** |
|  | **28th May 1588 The Armada sets sail from Lisbon** | **They make extremely slow progress as they tried to maintain a flotilla which meant they went at the speed of the slowest ship.** |
|  | **19th June Storms hit the Armada** | **The flotilla is scattered and has to regroup at Corunna** |
|  | **21st July the Armada sets off again** | **The English ships were out scouting around for sight of them** |
|  | **29th July the Armada sighted near the Isles of Scilly** | **English Western Squadron moves out into the English Channel** |
|  | **30th July – the Armada is seen from land on Lizard Point Cornwall** | **The Western Squadron manages to get behind the Armada** |
|  | **31st July – Battle near Plymouth** | **A couple of Spanish ships were damaged and later taken** |
| **1st August** | **Each ship in Armada is given its instructions to board the English ships and take them.**  **A messenger is sent to tell the Duke of Parma in the Netherlands to inform and collect the army** |  |
|  | **2nd August Battle near Portland Bill** |  |
|  | **3rd August Sea fights near the Isle of Wight** |  |
|  | **5th August The Armada still sailing on towards the Straits of Dover** |  |
|  | **6th August Lord Henry Seymour’s Narrow Seas Squadron joins the Western Squadron** |  |
|  | **7-8th August Fire ships sail into the anchored Spanish fleet** | **The English were able to fool the Spanish into thinking that they were hell-burners, (ships packed with explosive) so they cut their anchor cables and scattered to avoid the them thinking that they would explode at any second… but they didn’t!** |
|  | **8th August – Battle of Gravelines** | **Victory for the English** |
|  | **9th August – Ships of the Spanish Armada face danger as they are driven by wind and tide towards the Flemish sandbanks.** | **Just after mid-day the wind changed direction and the Armada sails north.** |
|  | **10 – 11 August The English pursue the Armada** |  |
|  | **12th August** | **English ships give up the chase and return to port.** |
|  | **13th August Medina Sidonia orders the remaining ships to sail round Scotland and make for Spain.** | **Hideous journey for the Spanish – bad weather destroys many ships or forces them onto the coast of Ireland where survivors were often killed.** |
|  | **22nd September Surviving ships began to arrive back in Spain.** | **It has clearly been a total disaster. But Philip blames no one and tries to regroup. Medina Sidonia retires and never goes near the sea again.** |
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**Source 1**

*Letter to the Marquis de Olivares, 11 February 1587. (Philip ll - Geoffrey Woodward pp109-110)Diplomatic manoeuvres preparatory to the Spanish Armada. Having gained the Pope’s blessing to invade England, Philip was anxious to secure a gift of 1 million ducats and papal approval in support of his claim to the English throne without appearing to be an imperialist. He instructed his ambassador in Rome accordingly.*

You will cautiously approach his holiness, and in such terms as you think fit endeavour to obtain from him a second brief declaring that, failing the Queen of Scotland, the right to the English crown falls to me. My claim, as you are aware, rests upon my descent from the House of Lancaster, and upon the will made by the Queen of Scotland, and mentioned in a letter from her of which a copy is enclosed herewith. You will impress upon his Holiness that I cannot undertake a war in England for the purpose merely of placing upon the throne a young heretic like the King of Scotland, who, indeed, is by his heresy incapacitated to succeed. His Holiness must, however, be assured that I have no intention of adding England to my dominions, but to settle the crown upon my daughter the Infanta.

**Source 2**

*On the 9th February 1588 Santa Cruz died. On 11th February the King advised the Duke of Medina Sidonia through Juan de Idiaquez, the King’s Secretary that he would succeed to the command of the Armada in the event of the death of Santa Cruz having not yet heard that he had actually died. Then on the 14th February he wrote from Madrid in the certain knowledge that Santa Cruz was dead. (Naish ‘Documents’ pp 57-8).*

Duke and Cousin: By my letter of the 11th you will have perceived my intention, if the illness of the Marquis should continue, Now having heard of his death – which is a very great loss – I have decided to confer on you the office of my Captain General of the Ocean since I am sure that you will know how to serve me well in it, as you have done in all things. I wished to acquaint you of this immediately so that, while the despatches which are to go forward presently, are being prepared, you may hasten your own preparations, in order to be able to leave quickly, as I have already advised you.

Your first action in the exercise of your new office will be to take charge of the Armada which I have ordered to assemble in Lisbon, and go to accomplish the task which you know about and which, with God’s help and your own diligence and care will, it is hoped, be brought to a successful conclusion. And as speed is particularly important, …..

The general opinion here lately has been that it would be as well to spread abroad the report that the galleons are bound for the Indies so as the more easily to recruit personnel, particularly seamen. Now, however that you are joining the Armada it may be that the matter wears a different complexion, and that when it is learned that they will serve with you and under your command recruits will respond more readily to the call of the Armada, than to that of the Indies…..

As it is important that I should receive news frequently of all that is being done, keep me fully advised.

**Source 3**

*The Duke of Medina Sidonia replied to the King on February 16th 1588. ((Naish ‘Documents’ pp 54)-*

I should not give a good account; for I do not understand it, know nothing about it, have no health for the sea and no money to spend upon it… I therefore do not reply to your question about the defence of this coast during my absence, as I shall remain here to attend to it myself, and serve his Majesty here as I have always done.”

**Source 4**

*The king replied to this on the 20th February (Naish ‘Documents’ pp 58).*

Duke and Cousin: I have just received your letter of the 16th of this month in reply to mine of the 11th and I have noted particularly what you write to Don Juan de Idiaquez to which you refer in your letter to me. All of what you say I attribute to your excess of modesty. But it is I who must judge your capabilities and parts, and I am fully satisfied with these. As for the good health which you say often deserts you at sea, we must believe that God will grant it to you in that great day dedicated to His service.

**Source 5**

*Idiaquez in a letter to Medina Sidonia, 28 February 1587. Quoted in The Grand Strategy of Philip ll - Geoffrey Parker p 195*

*By 1587 Philip recognised that the entire enterprise of England required rethinking. On the strategic level, some at court began to question the wisdom of a direct amphibious assault on an enemy who seemed so powerful at sea; but the government did not agree. Philip‘s new foreign policy adviser, Don Juan de Idiaquez said,*

’with the English established in Holland and Zealand, together with their infestation of the Americas and the High seas, it seems that defensive measures cannot deal with everything. Rather it obliges us to put their house to the torch’ in order to force them to withdraw from ‘the Netherlands, that voracious monster which gobbles up the troops and treasure of Spain’.

**Source 6**

*The King’s instructions to Medina Sidonia written on 1st April 1588 (Naish ‘Documents’ pp 59-61).*

This enterprise is of peculiar importance, dedicated, as it is, to the service of Our Lord, in whose cause I have been moved to order the assembling of these forces. Its successful issue is of the greatest moment for the general good and the prosperity of my own affairs; but that success is dependent on the action to be taken by the Armada and also on the selection of its Commander-in-Chief. Having then, considered these several points, I have hesitated, because of the confidence I have always felt in you, and of the experience and proof I have had of your manner of serving me, to place a business of such weight in other hands than yours. I therefore hope that the desired success will, with God’s help, result. But that you might be especially informed of my wishes, and able to carry them out, as the trust I feel in you obliged you to do, I wish to give you the following warnings and instructions:

In the first place, victories are God’s to give, and His to take away, as He sees fit. But the cause you are defending is so peculiarly His as to give us hope of His help and favour if it is not made unworthy by our sinfulness. For this reason you must take particular care in the Armada against sin of any kind, but especially the sin of blasphemy, by providing heavy penalties, to be rigorously carried out, if any err in this way….

As soon as you receive the order from me which will reach you separately, you are to sail with the whole Armada, making for the English Channel and pass through it until you reach Margate Cape, where you will join the Duke of Parma and Placencia, my nephew. You are to remove any obstacles and make secure his passage across the Channel, according to the plan pre-arranged and according to my decision….

…You should take special note, however, that the enemy’s aim will be to fight from a distance, since he has the advantage of superior artillery and of the large number of fireworks with which he will come provided; while ours must be to attack, and come to grips with the enemy at close quarters; and to succeed in doing this you will need to exert every effort. That you might be forewarned, you will receive a detailed report of the way in which the enemy arranges his artillery so as to be able to aim his broadsides low in the hull and so sink his opponents’ ships. The precautions you feel to be necessary you must take against such action.

God granting victory, as a prudent commander you should see that your squadrons do not break their battle formation and that their commanders, moved by greed, do not give pursuit to the enemy and take prizes. By planning the battle formation well in advance, you should see to it that the main body at least keeps united and together, especially if you engage the enemy in the Channel, the very nature of which, and the fact that both coasts are hostile to you, force submission to this precautionary measure, and compel you to fight in the manner most calculated to secure victory…..

It is understood that you will fight only if you cannot otherwise make secure the passage across to England of the Duke of Parma, my nephew. If, however, it can be made secure without fighting either because the enemy has been diverted, or in some other way, it will be well to obtain the same results and keep our forces in tact….

As soon as the Duke lands in England you may take the Armada to the Mouth of the River of London and keep watch there, making secure the passage of whatever reinforcements cross from Flanders for the Duke and intervening energetically wherever your assistance is needed…..

The experience I have had of your efforts to secure the good management of my property leads me to hope for your careful management of all relating to this Armada. You should try to keep intact as best you can, the wealth it represents, knowing what it has cost to assemble, and the financial difficulties it has caused. Take particular care that the muster rolls be prepared with scrupulous accuracy, not, however, leaving yourself open to reproach as far as the crews are concerned, since in that matter it is not merely a question of expense, but often at times, of victory. Do not, therefore omit to pay great attention to the quality of the food; its preservation and distribution; and to see that it does not run short before the time; since on these things the crews; wellbeing and health largely depend….

The importance of the task ahead being what it is, you will easily understand how anxious I shall be until I receive news of its success.

**Source 7**

*Philip II outlines the Armada’s objectives, 1588 in a letter to the Duke of Parma, April 1588 (Philip ll - Geoffrey Woodward , pp110-111)*

If the Armada succeeds, either by means of fighting or in consequence of the unreadiness of the enemy, you will, when the forces from here have arrived to assure your passage across, go over in God’s name and carry out the task assigned to you.

But if (which God forbid) the result be not so prosperous that our arms shall be able to settle matters, nor, on the other hand , so contrary that the enemy shall be relieved of anxiety on our account (which God shall surely not permit) and affairs be so counter-balanced that peace may not be altogether undesirable, you will endeavour to avail yourself as much as possible of the prestige of the armada and other circumstances, bearing in mind that, in addition to the ordinary conditions which are usually inserted in treaties of peace, there are three principal points upon which you must fix your attention.

The first is that in England the free use and exercise of our holy Catholic faith shall be permitted to all Catholics, native and foreign, and that those who are in exile shall be permitted to return. The second is that all the places in my Netherlands which the English hold shall be restored to me; and the third is that they [the English] shall recompense me for the injury they have done to me, my dominions, and my subjects, which will amount to an exceedingly great sum.

With regard to the free exercise of Catholicism, you may point out to them that since freedom of worship is allowed to the Huguenots in France, there will be no sacrifice of dignity in allowing the same privilege to Catholics in England. If they retort that I do not allow the same toleration in Flanders as exists in France, you may tell them that their country is in a difficult position, and point out to them how conducive to their tranquillity it would be to satisfy the Catholics in this way, and how largely it would increase their profits, since as soon as toleration was brought about, people from all of Christendom would flock thither in the assurance of safety.

If the principal design should fall through, it would be very influential in bringing them to these, or the best conditions possible, if the Armada were to take possession of the Isle of Wight. If this be once captured, it would be held, and would afford a shelter for the Armada, whilst the possession of it would enable us to hold our own against the enemy. This matter has also been laid before the Duke [Medina Sidonia], so that in case of failure, and if nothing else can be done, you may jointly with him discuss and decide with regard to it.

The King

**Source 8**

*Philip’s draft of an appeal for sacrifice to the Cortes, April 1588* (*Spain 1474-1598 – Jocelyn Hunt)*

We must be fully armed and on guard and ready for whatever may happen. This obliges us to make heavy and unprecedented expenditure, or else leave everything to terrible disaster. Nothing less is at stake than the security of our seas and of America and of our fleets, and the security of our homes. We can go forward only if the Cortes does something to help, for you know the state of the treasury. Confirm to me the confidence that I have in such good subjects. Come forward with the speedy supplies that this moment demands, and discuss the matter with the attention and concern that I very much expect from your loyalty and love for God’s service and my own.

**Source 9**

*Medina Sidonia writes to Philip imploring him to postpone the Armada, 24 June 1588(Philip ll Geoffrey Woodward , p111)Having experienced severe storm which dispersed the Armada within a few days of setting sail, and sensing that the expedition was ill-fated, Medina Sidonia wrote to the King from Corunna urging him to call it off.*

To undertake so great a task with forces equal to those of the enemy would be inadvisable, but to do so with an inferior force, as ours is now, with our men lacking in experience, would be still more unwise. I am bound to confess that I see very few, or hardly any, of those on the Armada with any knowledge of or ability to perform the duties entrusted to them. I have tested and watched this point very carefully, and your Majesty may believe me when I assure you that we are very weak…. The opportunity might be taken, and the difficulties avoided, by making some honourable terms with the enemy. Your Majesty’s necessities also make it desirable that you should ponder beforehand what you are undertaking, with so many envious rivals of greatness.

**Source 10**

*The king’s reply to Medina Sidonia 5 July 1588 (Naish ‘Documents’ pp 64).*

Duke and Cousin: I have received the letter under your hand of the 24th and from what I know of you, I believe that your bringing all these matters to my attention arises solely from your zeal to serve me and a desire to succeed in your office. The certainty that this is so prompts me to be franker with you that I should be with another. That you might see that the difficulties you raise as an argument for not continuing with the enterprise rest on no certain foundations, and might understand how those difficulties might be resolved. I have ordered the document to be prepared which you will receive with this letter. The reasons set out therein make me hold to my intention of proceeding with the task commenced, as soon as you have had the Armada refitted, as I count on your diligence to have had done already.

I have dedicated this service to God, and have taken you as an instrument to assist me in it. The confidence I have reposed you could not have been greater.

You deserve my thanks – which I give you – for your efforts in Lisbon to set out. No blame attaches to you for what happened in the storm; and I believe that I shall owe you further thanks for having had the damage so quickly repaired. May it please God that you may win much honour from the events of the future.

Stir yourself then to do you your duty, since you see that, pressed as I am by financial and other difficulties, I am resolute to overcome them all with God’s aid.

**Source 11**

*A Spanish opinion as to why the Armada failed. Don Francisco de Bobadilla was the general in charge of the Armada’s military on board the* **San Martin***. When he wrote this letter on 20 August 1588 from somewhere in the North Sea, he expressed his own theories why the Armada has failed to rendezvous with Parma’s army - Letter to don Juan de Idiaquez, (Philip ll Geoffrey Woodward , p111)*

I don’t know who had the idea that we could join forces in a place with such powerful currents, with a shore so open and liable to cross winds, and with so many sandbanks…. But I believe it is impossible to control all the things that must be concerted at the same time, in order to bring together forces that are so separated, unless one has a different sort of ship from those we brought, in the place we were instructed to join.

**Source 12**

*Pedro de Ribadeneyra, a leading Jesuit priest, on the causes of the Armada’s defeat (1588 ) SOURCE: Obras escogidas del padre Pedro de Rivadeneira (Madrid: M Ribadeneyra, 1868). Quoted in Early Modern Spain, A Documentary history edited by Jon Cowans*

The defeat in an endeavour that had been so costly and in which so many hopes had been invested provoked a great deal of soul-searching in Spain, particularly given predictions of a divinely guided victory.

I beg Your Lordship to pardon me if it should seem a new or improper thing for me to write what I will say here, for it is only my love and zeal to serve the Crown that leads me to write this ….

The judgements of our Lord God are highly secret, so we cannot know for sure what his divine Majesty intended in such an extraordinary event as that which happened to Your Majesty’s Armada. Yet …….it is a most reasonable thing to wonder …why God did not grant us success.

Personally, I consider it certain that He has not wished to deny it to us, but rather to delay it for a while, and in the meantime render us many other and greater mercies that we need more ….

Yet setting aside these things that we might gain from the events that happened to this Armada, I wish to point out the things that, after some prayer and much consideration, have occurred to me, and which may be the causes of this calamity and universal punishment ……

The first is that Your majesty should grant relief to many persons in this kingdom, and particularly in Andalusia, who have been wronged and …despoiled of their means of sustenance and support of their children, without being compensated or even heard, but rather imprisoned and afflicted for having wished to defend their possessions. I have heard that this has happened with such excess and violence, that serious and God-fearing people said before the Armada left that it was impossible for it to be victorious, for it went loaded down with the sweat and curses of so many miserable people… And this is especially the case because much of what has been taken, though it was taken in the name of Your Majesty and the Armada, was not taken for your royal service, but rather to enrich those who took it.

The second point is that Your majesty, with your very great prudence, should examine … what reasons there might be why such a sizable economy as Your Majesty’s shines so dimly and is sinking ….If poor management of the economy or the corruption of those in charge [is the cause], it is necessary to take care of this problem, punishing the thieves severely as destroyers of the republic, and showing mercy toward those who administer as they should…for the economy is the foundation of the army….

The third point is that Your majesty should look closely at whether, in affairs having to do with /England, …more concern has been given to the security of the state than to the glory of God and the growth of the Catholic faith, and whether, in order not to offend the queen of England, Your majesty has failed to protect those who have been persecuted and oppressed by her for being Catholic and loyal to God. For just as our Lord god is so jealous of His honour and wants all Christians, and especially kings, to strive to further it, … any carelessness in this matter offends him very much…

The fourth point is that more care must be given to removing public sins and scandals, especially when it comes to great persons who have the obligation to set a good example...it seems that the Lord may call you to account for what is not done…

The last point … is that Your majesty should consider that the greatest wealth of the kingdom is not an abundance of gold and silver,…but rather the proliferation and abundance of courageous and magnanimous men who can be pillars of the republic in war and in peace….You are sorely lacking in such men, as the outcome of this expedition has demonstrated…And if Your Majesty should favour them, rewarding those who serve you well, I believe that there will be men to fill your kingdom and carry out all the tasks of peace and war….

**Source 13**

I note what you say about the need to make the Channel safe, because of the risk of sending a fleet like ours to sail between France and England at the appointed time (which often sees very bad weather in the Channel) without having a safe port in either, nor in Flanders (except for Dunkirk, which apart from being the only one available is not suitable for ships of large draught), which would force it to face the weather; leaving aside the general advantages, and the more detailed knowledge of those coasts, that the enemy fleet will have. All these are points of substance, and I am looking into them.

*Philip ll to the Duke of Parma, 28th Feb, 1587 (Quoted in The Grand Strategy of Philip ll, G Parker p195-196*)

**Source 14**

*The cost of his armed forces placed a tremendous strain on Philip’s finances: the Armada cost 30,000 ducats a day, and Parma’s army a further 15,000. By March 1588 the king had to sell his late wife’s jewels in order to raise funds. Philip ll speaking to the Count of Barajas, 18th June 1588 (Quoted in The Grand Strategy of Philip ll, by G Parker p199)*

‘finding money is so important that all of us must concentrate only on that and on nothing else, because whatever victories we may win, I do not know what will come of them (unless God performs a miracle) without money’.

**Source 15**

*Father Geronimo de Sepulvada ; a Catholic priest described the impact of the defeat of the Armada. (Quoted in The Grand Strategy of Philip ll, by G Parker p199)*

‘worthy to be wept over for ever ….because it lost us the respect and good reputation that we used to have among warlike people ….The grief it caused in all of Spain was extraordinary: almost the entire country went into mourning …People talked of nothing else..’

**Source 16**

*Don Juan de Idiaquez in a letter to the Duke of Parma, 31 August 1588 (Quoted in The Grand Strategy of Philip ll, by G Parker p270) about the scale of the disaster, and the criticisms it occasioned, and how this affected the king. On 31st August, when the first news arrived form Parma that he had not been able to rendezvous with Medina Sidonia, Secretary of State Idiaquez* wrote.

He could not ‘exaggerate the grief caused by seeing something that cost so much time, money and trouble – and is so important to the service of God and His Majesty – placed in jeopardy, just at the point where it was about to bear fruit. His Majesty has felt it more than you would believe possible, and without some remaining hope in God that all this might have achieved something for his cause … I do not know how he could bear such a great blow. Certainly this leaves no time to think about anything else, nor to think of it without excessive grief.

**Source 17**

*Ex ambassador to Portugal Juan de Silva wrote to Esteban de Ibarra about the fact that the English were landing troops on the Portuguese coast and attacking at will. Coimbra 13 June and 10 July 1589 (quoted in Henry Kamen “Philip of Spain” pp277-8)*

And all this is happening because our reputation is lame and broken, laid low by the defeat of the recent Armada”….”I must confess that never in my life have I found myself so close to having to flee from danger”……”we cannot blame any of our reverses on bad luck or attribute any of our successes to diligence….as for the attention that His Majesty pays to details of little consequence, we have agreed for years that it is lamentable that he wastes time in these things… His Majesty’s head is capable of absorbing a vast quantity of business but does not distinguish between what he should reserve for himself and what he should entrust to others. As a result time and effort is spent in not taking measures which should be taken; and taking them when there is no time or money or reason; and making savings which cost three times more than is saved; and beginning late and therefore in haste, but because in haste beginning inadequately. Whoever doesn’t see this is blind. … It seems that everybody agrees with this, for I see that all put their faith in miracles and supernatural solutions”.

**Source 18**

*Philip wrote in November 1588 that he was pleased his Council thought he should try again*. *Quoted in The Grand Strategy of Philip ll, by G Parker p271)*

I rejoiced greatly to read all that these papers said, which corresponds perfectly to what one might expect from those who said it, and to the intention that has inclined me to this enterprise since the beginning, for the service of Our Lord, the defence of His cause and the benefit of these realms… I undertake to deal swiftly with everything necessary to achieve all this, and to remember all the things that are necessary…. I shall never fail to stand up for the cause of God and the well-being of these kingdoms.

**Source 19**

*The Captain-general of artillery ordered ships that this time would be better able to fire back on the English. Quoted in The Grand Strategy of Philip ll, by G Parker p272)*

Each shop to carry guns tht are appropriate to its size and weight, and of a sort that can do damage from a distance because of their good range, and from close range wreak notable destruction on the enemy fleet.

**The Chief Business: the Spanish Armada, 1588 By Patrick Williams | Published in History Review 2009**

Patrick Williams provides us with the results of the latest research on the Armada

In May 1588, Philip II of Spain sent his ‘Invincible Armada’ to overthrow Elizabeth I, the lawful queen of England. In despatching his great fleet, Philip broke not only with his own reputation as ‘the Prudent King’ but also with the long tradition of friendship between Spain and England – friendship which had been sealed with marriage on three occasions: Catherine of Aragon had married Arthur, Prince of Wales (1501) and Henry VIII (1509), while Philip himself had married Mary I and served as her king consort (1554- 58). Indeed Philip II protected Elizabeth for a decade while she consolidated her hold on the throne and, although the two rulers came to despise each other, they seemed determined to avoid war at almost any cost. For both of them, war was prohibitively expensive – and dangerously unpredictable.

Origins

Why, then, did these two conservative monarchs break with each other? Most importantly, a major structural change in European politics facilitated the breach: the collapse of France into civil and religious wars after 1560 – ‘the French Wars of Religion’ – helped fracture the tacit alliance between England and Spain that was based upon their mutual fear of France. Religious hostility deepened the tensions, for in the 1560s Elizabeth established England as a leading Protestant power while Philip II came to be the very personification of the Catholic ‘Counter Reformation’.

Within that overall context, three issues lay at the core of the breakdown, and each began to come into focus around 1567-8, 20 years before the Armada sailed. In 1567 Philip established a powerful standing army (‘the Army of Flanders’) to crush rebellion in his patrimonial lands of the Low Countries. The presence of this army across the Straits of Dover helped destabilise relations with England, for Elizabeth inevitably feared that it might be used against her. Secondly, Spain refused to allow the English access to the fabulously rich colonies in the Caribbean (and in 1568 ambushed John Hawkins and Francis Drake when they attempted to do so). Thirdly, the arrival in England in 1568 of Mary Stuart, deposed queen of Scotland, created a dual focal point for opponents of Elizabeth, since Mary had a claim on the English throne and was a Roman Catholic. In 1570 Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth and freed Catholic subjects from their loyalty to her. Mary took full advantage and – even while under house arrest – encouraged one assassination attempt after another against Elizabeth, unaware that the government knew virtually every detail of her intrigues.

Philip II was among those who saw usefulness in the turbulent Queen of Scots. As relations with England deteriorated, he toyed in 1569 with the idea of invading England from the Low Countries to put Mary on the throne but he had too many commitments elsewhere to follow through on the plan. In 1571 he supported a conspiracy to assassinate Elizabeth (the ‘Ridolfi Plot’); his relationship with Elizabeth never recovered. In 1574 and 1575 Philip prepared large fleets in his northern ports, ostensibly to reinforce the Army of Flanders but almost certainly to invade England. Again, nothing materialised: the first fleet was aborted when its commander died and the second was shattered by a storm off Ushant. While Philip was not ready for all-out war with England, in the years 1569-75 he was tempted by the prospect of invading the country in a sudden, surprise, operation. But always, at this time, he had other more urgent priorities.

Elizabeth looked to her navy for defence. She followed the advice of John Hawkins, who had insisted after 1568 that England needed warships that could sail long distances at speed but which could also manoeuvre quickly to bring their guns to bear on the enemy; production of the new ships (and their guns) began in the early 1570s. Their value against Spanish galleons was demonstrated by Francis Drake, when on his circumnavigation of the globe (1577-80) he sacked Valparaiso and captured an enormous Spanish treasure ship off Peru. These episodes in the Pacific did not count as acts of war because they were private ventures and took place ‘beyond the line’, but when Elizabeth knighted Drake in April 1580 (and gratefully accepted some of his Spanish treasure) she signalled that she had effectively broken the peace with Spain. But still she was not ready for war.

Preparations

In 1580, Spanish power expanded substantially with the conquest of Portugal (and its empire). In 1583, Philip rounded out this triumph by having Álvaro de Bazán, I Marquis of Santa Cruz, capture the Portuguese islands of the Azores. Exultant, on 9 August 1583, Santa Cruz urged Philip to use the conquest of the Azores as a template for the invasion of England and – knowing his king – assured Philip that such an invasion would also surely end the rebellion in the Low Countries. Philip grasped enthusiastically at the strategy; he appointed Santa Cruz as ‘Captain General of the Atlantic Sea’. Happily, the conquest of Portugal also provided Philip with 12 great galleons; they would be used against England.

As Philip’s chief admiral enticed him with the prospect of conquering England, his leading general drove all before him in the Low Countries. Alexander Farnese, nephew to the king (and Prince of Parma from 1586), took Dunkirk and Nieupoort in 1583 and Brussels, Bruges and Ghent in 1584. When on 10 July 1584 William of Orange, the leader of the rebellion, was assassinated, the Dutch cause seemed doomed, and Elizabeth acknowledged that she would have to intervene. Exactly as Parma achieved his most brilliant triumph in capturing Antwerp (17 August), Elizabeth formally agreed to send an expeditionary force to aid the Dutch (‘Treaty of Nonsuch’, 20 August). She also loosed Drake, and when at the turn of 1585-86 the Earl of Leicester – personal favourite of the Queen – led 5,000 men into the Low Countries and Drake savaged Philip’s territories in Spain and the Caribbean, Elizabeth had unambiguously crossed the line dividing peace from war.

Philip crossed that line four months later. Enraged by the assaults on his territories, on 29th December he informed Parma that he had decided to proceed to ‘the chief business’ – the invasion of England. On 26th January 1586 Philip ordered Santa Cruz to establish ‘a good fleet’ in Lisbon for action by the early summer. Although it proved impossible to send the expedition in 1586 – Parma did not send Philip his detailed plans until April – the die was cast.

Philip found enthusiastic support from Pope Sixtus V (elected, 28 April 1585), who proclaimed a crusade against England and agreed to deposit one million ducats against the day when the Armada landed in England. A major obstacle to ‘the chief business’ was removed when Mary Stuart finally – and inevitably – went to the block on 18 February 1587; her incitement of ‘the Babington Plot’ to murder Elizabeth was a treachery too far for her royal cousin. Mary’s death relieved Philip of the fear that his fleet would remove Elizabeth only to put the pro-French Mary Stuart on the throne.

Drake forced a further delay when he famously ‘singed the King of Spain’s beard’ (as he put it) by destroying 20 large vessels and many of the provisions of the Armada in Cadiz, Sagres and Lisbon (April-May 1587). However, the most damaging blow that Drake inflicted on the Armada came about almost by accident, for when Santa Cruz learned that Drake had sailed off to the Azores to seize the treasure fleet he felt obliged to use some Armada galleons to protect the treasure fleet and ferry it home safely. He was away for ten weeks and when he returned to Lisbon (28 September), his warships were badly in need of repair and reprovisioning – and his instructions for the invasion of England were waiting for him.

Santa Cruz was dismayed to find that Philip had subordinated his plan to Parma’s: he was to sail from Lisbon and transport Parma and his 27,000 troops across to Kent. Parma would then march on London and impose a settlement on Elizabeth, executing the Queen if need arose, while the Armada protected his flank. Philip neglected to say how Parma’s men were to join the Armada without the facilities of a deep-water port. Santa Cruz was enraged to find that rather than controlling the invasion he was merely to serve as Parma’s troopcarrier. He seriously considered resigning, though his sense of duty would not allow him to do so.

And still the weather was against him: even as Santa Cruz repaired his fleet, a violent storm damaged 39 ships inside the harbour at Lisbon (16 November) and created further delay. When on 12 December Santa Cruz informed Philip that the fleet might be able to sail in a month, he was peremptorily ordered to go to sea without wasting an hour’s time. For Philip even to contemplate sending the Armada in midwinter was an absurdity, born of his humiliation at repeated failures to despatch the fleet. The unrelenting pressure killed the great admiral: Santa Cruz collapsed with exhaustion, and on 9 February 1588 he died.

Philip, too, was exhausted but he responded quickly to the crisis by appointing his leading nobleman to succeed Santa Cruz. The decision has been much criticised but was eminently practical: Alonso Pérez de Guzmán, VII duke of Medina Sidonia, was an experienced naval administrator and had the rank to ensure that all on board would obey him. Certainly he bitterly resented his appointment, but when on 1 April 1588 Philip issued him with his instructions for the Enterprise of England, he bowed to the royal will, as Santa Cruz had done before him. He could rely on the advice of a prodigiously experienced group of naval commanders – men such as Alonso Martínez de Leiva, Juan Martínez de Recalde, Miguel de Oquendo and Diego Flores de Valdés. He had, too, an ideal commander for his soldiers in Francisco de Bobadilla, a field general of legendary bravery (and ruthlessness). Meanwhile, Parma did his best to solve the problem of getting his men out to sea; he cut a canal from Antwerp to Bruges and built flat-bottomed boats to carry them. But he barely bothered to disguise his scepticism about ‘the Enterprise of England’, much less his resentment at having to abandon his campaigns in the Low Countries to be part of it.

Elizabeth’s advisers were also deeply divided. Drake and Hawkins urged the queen to destroy the Armada in Lisbon but her political advisers insisted that the fleet had to remain in home waters at a time of dire national peril: it was to these latter men that Elizabeth listened. Like Philip, Elizabeth chose a leading nobleman to control her fractious seadogs, naming Charles Howard, Lord of Effingham. Drake – who terrified his colleagues almost as much as he did the Spanish – was fobbed off with the position of vice-admiral. By 3 June, Howard and the main fleet were stationed at Plymouth while Lord Henry Seymour guarded the Straits.

On 9 May, Medina Sidonia mustered his men and sealed his fleet off in Lisbon harbour (not least so that no one could flee from it). But still it was not ready to sail for a further three weeks, and so its men continued to use up its provisions and to endure worsening sanitary conditions – three weeks, after all, was as long as most voyages lasted at this time. When on 30 May the Armada at last edged out to sea, it consisted of 141 ships and 26,961 men (7,666 seamen and 19,295 soldiers). Still, the weather would not relent, and Medina Sidonia decided to re-provision at Corunna. As the fleet entered the harbour (19 June) it was struck by a powerful storm that threw scores of ships into the Atlantic and Biscay. For Medina Sidonia, it was the last straw: he urged Philip to abandon the enterprise and negotiate an honourable settlement with Elizabeth. Outraged, Philip ordered him to sail on at once. On 21-22 July – ten weeks after the last men had gone on board – the Armada set to sea again. It consisted now of 127 ships – 20 galleons and four galleasses; 44 armed merchantmen, 38 auxiliaries and 21 supply ships.

Victory and Defeat

On 29 July at about 4.00 pm the Armada sighted England. The Golden Hinde carried the news of its arrival to Plymouth: the story that Drake refused to interrupt his game of bowls is – alas ! – almost certainly apocryphal. Some commanders urged Medina Sidonia to attack the English fleet in Plymouth Sound but he insisted on pressing ahead for the Straits. Unknown to him, in the late afternoon the English beat out of Plymouth against the prevailing wind and sailed around the Armada to take up position to the windward: Howard had seized a defining advantage. The Armada was now in a crescent formation to protect its fighting galleons in the centre but the formation had the disadvantages of preventing it from using the majority of its guns and of making it more likely that ships could collide with each other.

At 9.00 am on 31 July the English fired the first cannonade, subjecting the San Juan de Portugal to 300 or so rounds. At about 5.00 pm the San Salvador was disabled by an explosion and taken by the English. Shortly afterwards, Medina Sidonia reluctantly abandoned the Nuestra Señora del Rosario, which had been damaged in a collision. Drake sneaked up on her during the night and – to the disgust of Frobisher – claimed her as his prize. Possession of the two ships made it evident to the English that the men on the enemy fleet were enduring conditions of dreadful hardship and squalor; they must have been heartened by the knowledge.

On 2 August, Howard launched the first full assault, attacking Medina Sidonia’s own galleon, the San Martín, for ten hours. The engagement made it obvious to the English commanders that although they would not readily sink Spanish galleons they had little to fear from the long-range guns of the Armada: while the English discharged over 500 cannon balls, the San Martín fired only 80 shots, and all of them were from one side. Accordingly, Howard decided to conserve his ammunition for the decisive battle at the Straits. Certainly, there was heavy fighting off the Isle of Wight as the English ensured that the Spanish could not attempt a landing there, but otherwise the Armada was not attacked for three days after 3-4 August – but still, of course, it continued to use up its valuable (and rotting) provisions and water.

At about 4.00 pm on 6 August, the Armada moved into Calais Roads. Now, Medina Sidonia received the shattering news that Parma would not be able to join him for at least a week, even assuming he could escape the flotilla of Dutch ships barricading him in. Wracked with anxiety, in the late afternoon Medina Sidonia gave the fatal order to weigh anchor: he was 35 kilometres from Dunkirk.

Lord Seymour now joined Howard, and the combined English fleet – 160 or so strong – took up position facing the Armada. Still, Howard waited, until as the sun went down the Spanish were terrified to realise that eight fireships were being towed towards them. Believing that the fireships were packed with explosives and incendiaries, Medina Sidonia ordered his fleet to disperse and regroup after the danger had passed. In fact, the fireships were not laden with bombs and did hardly any damage, but their very appearance achieved what the redoubtable English commanders had been unable to do: they broke the formation of the Spanish fleet. As panic spread through the Armada, some captains even cut their anchors: their actions would have dreadful effect in the terrible hours and weeks to come.

At dawn on 8 August, the English moved in the wind and currents ran strongly in their favour. The onslaught was ferocious and unremitting. The ‘battle of Gravelines’ lasted for nine hours, and in essence it involved a score or so fighting galleons on each side. Much of the battle was fought at such close-quarters that sailors could hurl abuse at each other, though the English were careful not to allow the Spanish to come close enough to grapple and board. The wisdom of Howard’s decision to preserve his ammunition now became apparent. It has been calculated that the firepower of the Armada was at best only three-quarters that of the English. Certainly, the Spanish ships had less than one-third of the long-range guns that the English had (172:497) and only one-half of the heavy and medium guns (165:251). Worse still, the Spanish heavy guns could not be reloaded and fired quickly, and indeed, since many of the guns had been acquired from across Europe, the ships often did not have the correct cannonballs to use in them. The Battle of Gravelines was desperately uneven.

The San Martín, isolated with only four galleons to protect it, was struck by more than 200 cannon balls and lost about 40 men. But the Spanish rallied to their commander and fought with a courage that deeply impressed the English. Only one ship was sunk in battle but others were captured or ran aground; galleys would have been useful in these dreadful hours to tow ships to safety. It has been calculated that, of the 2,636 men who were lost from the Armada in battle, probably 1,000 died (and a further 800 were wounded) at Gravelines.

On 9 August, as Medina Sidonia consulted his commanders as to whether he could fight his way back into the Channel, fierce winds – ‘Protestant winds’ – forced the Armada into the North Sea. The duke decided that he had to head home around the British Isles: the men who had survived the hardships of the voyage and the battle of Gravelines still had their worst ordeal ahead of them. The English pursued the Armada for two days but turned away as it neared Scotland; Seymour stayed on guard at the Straits to prevent Parma attempting to invade while Howard devoted himself to helping his wounded sailors, hundreds of whom were dying in the streets of Margate.

As the Armada struggled northwards, ships began to fall away. A last muster was held on 19-21 August – 112 ships were counted – but now it was every ship for itself. For a month the Armada was hammered by gales as it headed round Scotland and Ireland. Now it suffered its greatest losses: at least 13 major ships were among the 28 that were lost and 6,554 men died, many of them slaughtered after they had struggled ashore.

Of the 127 ships that had left Corunna in July, 92 returned home but only half of these were fit to be used again. A total of 13,399 men reached Spain – 3,834 sailors and 9,565 soldiers – but even then hundreds died before they could be taken ashore.

Aftermath

The Armada had failed. Philip absolved Medina Sidonia of culpability for the disaster, accepting – like Elizabeth! – that God’s winds had blown against his fleet. Instinctively, the king recognised that he would have to send another armada against England to re-establish his prestige and he committed himself to a massive shipbuilding programme. But – dramatically and unpredictably – he then rescheduled all his priorities in foreign affairs when the assassination of Henry III (1 August 1589) made Henry of Navarre heir to the French throne. The second Armada would not sail until 1596. Twice, in 1590 and 1592, Philip diverted Parma into France to thwart Navarre, but to no avail: Henry reconverted to Catholicism in 1593 and in 1594 was crowned as Henry IV. In January 1595 he declared war on Spain.

Triumphant though Elizabeth was – it has been remarked that there now began ‘the years of Gloriana’ – she was deeply anxious that the Armada veterans might be promptly repaired and sent against her, and so in 1589 she equipped Drake with 180 ships and 23,000 men to destroy the surviving ships in Santander. Once again, Drake ignored orders and indulged in some old-fashioned pillaging before again setting off – in vain – to catch the treasure fleet at the Azores. So irresponsible was he that he lost the staggering number of 11,000 men to illness and disease: it was a greater loss than the Armada had suffered – and the surviving Armada galleons were undamaged. Lord Howard was more successful; in 1596 he destroyed 30 galleons that were being laden in Cadiz for the Indies, but when Elizabeth learned how much plunder had been lost she was indignant with her commander.

For Philip II, the sacking of his greatest seaport was the worst humiliation of his reign, more damaging to his reputation than even the defeat of the Armada. He knew that he had to respond with a new armada against England. Again, he mismanaged the campaign, forcing his commander – the Adelantado of Castile – to sail late in the season and with a fleet that he knew to be under-prepared: the Adelantado sailed from Ferrol on 16 October 1596 with 98 ships and 15,000 men but the fleet was duly dispersed by a storm off Finisterre. In 1597 Philip again forced the Adelantado to sail late in the year (18 October) with 136 ships – a fleet larger than that of 1588 – and 12,634 men. This time, he reached the Western Approaches before a storm obliged him to return home. For the third time, a Spanish Armada had been defeated by Protestant winds. Now it was evident to all Europe that if Spanish power had not been broken, it had certainly been fractured and diminished by its failures against England.

Philip II died on 13 September 1598. Philip III sent a fourth armada, but although it landed men in Ireland they were easily defeated. The era of the armadas came thereby to an end. Elizabeth I died on 24 March 1603 and Philip III and James I brought hostilities to an end (Treaty of London, 18 May 1604). Anglo-Spanish relations moved tentatively back towards their traditional friendship as both states came to fear the renewed power of France under Henry IV. In 1605, James I sent an embassy to Spain to ratify the peace and to open negotiations for a marriage. With delicious irony he named Lord Howard, now Earl of Nottingham, to lead it, and so the man who had led the fleets that defeated the Armada in 1588 and sacked Cadiz in 1596 enjoyed the lavish hospitality of the King of Spain The Duke of Medina Sidonia stayed far away, tending to his estates in the south.

Issues to debate

• To what extent did Elizabeth I provoke Philip II into sending the Armada of 1588?

• Why did the Armada fail?

• What was the significance of the Armada for Anglo-Spanish relations?

Further reading

• English translations of important Spanish documents are printed by G. P. B. Naish,‘Documents Illustrating the History of the Spanish Armada’ in D.W.Waters, The Elizabethan Navy and the Armada of Spain (Greenwich, 1975).

• Recent advances in the study of the Armada can best be approached through the study by Colin Martin and Geoffrey Parker, The Spanish Armada (Manchester University Press, 1999).

• An important collection of essays produced for the anniversary in 1988 is M. Rodríguez-Salgado and S. Adams (eds.), England, Spain and the Gran Armada (John Donald, Edinburgh, 1991).

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