

Extract from Graham Darby. *Spain in the Seventeenth Century*.¹

1 The Spanish Habsburg Monarchy: Origins

At the beginning of the seventeenth century Spain was the foremost power in Europe, if not the world, with territory in northern Europe, Italy, the Mediterranean, the Americas, Africa, India and the Orient. Yet Spain itself was rather unpromising material for greatness; the land was barren, the economy backward and the peninsula was politically fragmented. How, then, had Spain become such a great power? The answer is a complex one, but it was really as a result of dynastic marriage and fortuitous inheritance. The Austrian Habsburg family had inherited the Valois duchy of Burgundy (roughly present-day Holland, Belgium, Luxemburg, and part of Burgundy itself) and the crowns of Aragon (which included the Balearics, Sardinia, Naples and Sicily) and Castile (which included Navarre and the Americas - namely, Mexico and Peru). All this territory came to reside in a single person, Charles Habsburg, the Emperor' Charles V (1519- 56), who added the duchy of Milan (see Dynastic Table). This empire had not been planned. It had come about by accident, and from the very beginning it was recognised that it was going to be extremely difficult to hold together. In fact it proved too much for one man, and when Charles abdicated (1555-56) he divided his territories between his brother and his son (the Austrian and Spanish branches, respectively). In this way the Spanish Monarchy ... emerged as a formidable power in its own right.

Charles's imperial legacy was an enormous burden and represented a distortion in the pattern of interests of the kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula, which had been largely focused on the Mediterranean and America. But although Castile, with its relatively small population and weak economy, did not have the resources to sustain great-power status on its own, when these were allied with the naval expertise and military manpower of Genoa and Naples, Flemish and Milanese weaponry and American silver, it could. In any event we must be careful not to judge the Monarchy from our own perspective of the compact nation state. The Spanish Habsburgs looked upon their network of domains as a family patrimony, and this concept of patrimony was accepted and understood by the elite - the propertied families who cherished their own inheritances in the same spirit (53). Moreover, it was not unusual for rulers to have territory separated by large tracts of land or sea, and if their government was remote and undemanding, as it usually was in the Spanish Monarchy, then there was little reason to challenge it. It was attempts at increasing control beyond what was customary which led to unrest and rebellion, as happened with the Dutch in the sixteenth century and the Portuguese and Catalans in the seventeenth.

Philip II (1556-98)

Unlike his father, Philip saw himself as truly Spanish (or, more correctly, Castilian). He had been born in Castile and spoke only Castilian. 'What had been a polyglot empire administered by a migratory court now became Castilian ruled from a fixed point'. Philip was responsible for

¹ Graham Darby. *Spain in the Seventeenth Century*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 19-28.

considerable achievements: the 'taming of America' and the conquest of the Philippines (from 1565) and Portugal (1580) were outstanding successes; and he built up Spain as a considerable military and naval power. Some historians have gone so far as to describe Philip's reign as the 'zenith' of Spanish power and achievement (for example, Merriman and Ortiz). But this is to underestimate Spain's strength in the seventeenth century and to overestimate it in the sixteenth. Only a weak and divided France, after the accidental death of Henry II in 1559, had made Spanish hegemony in Europe possible. Moreover, many of Philip's policies were far from successful and had disastrous consequences. He missed the opportunity for a satisfactory peace with the Turks at the beginning of the reign and lost almost all of North Africa to Islam. He provoked the Dutch into a rebellion which he could not suppress; he attempted to invade England and failed; and although he successfully invaded France he was unable to prevent Henry IV's triumph. He placed an enormous tax burden on the ordinary Castilian (up 430 per cent, 1559-98), yet despite this he seriously overspent, thus creating a cumulative debt of 85 million ducats' (up from 30 million). In this way he paid for defence in the present by mortgaging the future. In many ways Philip II's reign set the agenda for Spanish policy in the seventeenth century; but his legacy of the Dutch rebellion and financial insolvency were to be intolerable burdens.

Philip's ambitious foreign policy had created suspicion among Spain's enemies, and Cardinal Richelieu declared his belief in 1624 that 'one cannot doubt that the Spaniards aspire to universal domination'. In fact, in the seventeenth century Spanish policy was largely defensive - to maintain the integrity of the dynastic inheritance - but this was easily misunderstood. Keeping open communications between possessions separated by land and sea sometimes involved trespassing on territory in between, and it required an active political interest in neighbouring states which sometimes cut across the interests of other powers. In addition, the King of Spain had interests outside his own patrimony, principally with regard to his Austrian cousins in Vienna, who were also, as Holy Roman Emperors, nominal rulers over Germany. The Spanish Monarchy also had religious interests which were not confined within its boundaries. The Most Catholic King, as the King of Spain was known, was not only concerned to defend Christianity against the Turk and to root out all brands of heterodoxy from his own dominions, but as self-appointed champion of the Counter-Reformation Catholic Church he confronted the rising tide of heresy wherever that might be. The Spanish Habsburgs were also driven by something less easy to gauge - namely, a highly developed concern to preserve their *reputación*. *Reputación* consisted mainly of outward appearances, involving the maintenance of prestige and of face-saving devices to disguise setbacks. It is important to understand this concept since it helps to explain why on many occasions policy would be conceived not in terms of what was realistic but in terms of what was best for the King's *reputación*.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century Spain was still the foremost power in Europe, and although the treaties of 1598 with France, 1604 with England and 1609 with the Dutch may have marked the failure of Philip II's grandiose schemes, they did offer the Monarchy the opportunity for conservation and recuperation. However, as it turned out, the Duke of Lerma's cautious policies (1598-1618) were only to be a short interlude. Under Olivares (1622-43) there was a reversion to the forward policy of Philip II, and the ensuing continual warfare, though it was justified as a defence of essential dynastic, religious and commercial interests, threatened the

integrity of the Monarchy. Increased commitments at a time of economic decline made the struggle for survival all the more difficult, leading to a series of setbacks in the 1640s, and, after a brief recovery, a dramatic collapse of power between 1656 and 1668. It was the revival of France that presented Spain with its greatest challenge, and during the course of the century the *monarquía* lost primacy of place to the Bourbons. In 1648 it was compelled to acknowledge the independence of the Dutch, and later that of the Portuguese (1668); in addition, it was forced to cede Roussillon, Cerdagne and Artois (1659), Charleroi, Lille and Tournai (1668), Franche-Comte (1678), and Luxemburg and the County of Flanders (1684) to France (though the last two were returned in 1697). Finally, in 1713/14 the Monarchy was divested of the Spanish Netherlands, Milan, Naples, Sicily, Sardinia, Minorca and Gibraltar. Yet even so, when the Spanish Monarchy was finally broken up in 1713/14 it was for dynastic reasons, the death of the last Habsburg, rather than because of military defeat or economic weakness. It would appear, then, that the reason for the demise of the Spanish Monarchy was very similar to the reason for its rise.

2 Government and Resources

King, councils and Cortes

The King's power within the Spanish Monarchy varied according to regional tradition and custom. It was most extensive in Castile, where he resided, maintained his court and the councils of government. The King was *absoluto*; this meant he had no superior in Castile. He was the source of all authority, made all appointments and all the laws. In addition, he had complete control over policy and 'could requisition property, demand personal services for war, and exploit a wide, and imprecisely defined, range of regalian rights over money, trade, land, offices, status and honours'. However, there was a lot of difference between the theory of 'absolute royal power' and its practical application. In reality there was a myriad of restrictions limiting the King's power.

The King was bound by the law. Moreover, law-making itself was restricted by tradition and custom, and by the device whereby laws were 'to be obeyed but not put into effect' (*obedézcase, pero no se cumpla*) pending an appeal to the Council of Castile. The sheer size of the Monarchy and its governmental problems created the need for an extensive bureaucracy, and this too acted as a brake on royal power, as did the Cortes', which played an important role in the imposition of taxation. The Church too could be an impediment, since the King required the approval of the Pope in Rome to exercise his authority in its regard, and the clergy themselves often 'spearheaded resistance to taxation'.

'The formality of the court, its clockwork routine, the privacy of the royal person, the public impassivity of the king - Philip IV was described by foreign visitors as like a statue - were part of a propaganda of monarchy as an institution in which the office was greater than the man'. However, the personality of the ruler remained of fundamental importance, and in the seventeenth century Spain was not blessed with outstanding monarchs. Philip III (1598-1621) was a reluctant king; his son Philip IV (1621-65), though infinitely more conscientious, was weak and indecisive, and his son, Charles II (1665-1700), was retarded. More often than not, policy in the seventeenth century was decided by the councils or the ministers, or indeed by a single minister. The all-powerful minister or

valido (favourite) was a new phenomenon in the seventeenth century (and not only in Spain); Lerma under Philip III and Olivares under Philip IV exercised enormous control over policy and patronage. Subsequent ministers like Don Luis de Haro, in power between 1643 and 1661, the Duke of Medinaceli (1680-85) and the Count of Oropesa (1685-91, 1698-99) are more correctly described as prime ministers since their powers were more restricted. Thus an unsatisfactory king could be compensated for by a capable minister and an efficient bureaucracy.

Since the King could not be present in all his dominions, their interests were served by representation on councils sitting in Madrid. There were twelve councils in all, the most important being the Council of State (*Estado*), formed in 1526, which dealt with foreign policy. Next came the Council of War (*Guerra*), formed in 1522, which dealt only with peninsular Spain and was very much an adjunct to the Council of State. There were seven superior or supreme councils which were independent of one another but under the supervision of the Council of State. The most important was the Council of Castile which dealt with the administrative and judicial affairs of Castile, and its president was the second person in the kingdom after the King. The Chamber (*Camara*) of Castile became a permanent department of the Council of Castile from 1588 to deal with Church affairs and appointments and grants of privileges. The Council of the Indies (1524) was also important because of its wide range of competence over the administration of the New World and overseas trade. The Council of Aragon (1494) usually consisted of Aragonese personnel and liaised with the viceroys of Aragon, Valencia, Catalonia, Sardinia and the Balearics. The Council of the Inquisition had been set up in 1483 and had a large staff 'on the ground' to enforce policy. The Council of Italy (1555) administered the Italian states of Milan, Naples and Sicily. This had been the responsibility of Aragon, but the creation of a separate council indicated the importance of this area to the Monarchy. The Councils of Portugal (1582) and Flanders (1588) were set up, like that of Italy, to deal with the day-to-day correspondence to and from these places. In addition to these seven superior councils, there were three more: Finance (*Hacienda*, 1523), which was responsible to the Council of Castile; Military Orders (1489), which administered the three chivalric orders; and Crusade (1509), which administered the *cruzada* tax - though the last two were not of any great significance in the seventeenth century.

