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1450–1820
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The Iberian polities within Europe

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CHAPTER THREE

THE IBERIAN POLITIES
WITHIN EUROPE
Politics and state building

José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, political competition gave rise, among other things, to a political system that incorporated several smaller powers under the leadership of the Spanish kingdoms. By the middle of the century this new construction, the Spanish monarchy, successfully limited the expansionist aspirations of its main international rivals, the Turkish empire and the kingdom of France, thus conserving its political, juridical, and territorial integrity. In the second half of the century, a number of circumstances and factors—the political crisis engulfing many neighbouring countries; the confessional breakdown; the relative efficacy of the monarchy’s structure, due to its flexible and hierarchical organisation—allowed the king of Spain to claim European hegemony, and to come to be seen as the political leader of the Catholic world. As a consequence, requests for intervention and assistance soon multiplied and surpassed the monarchy’s available resources. The allies of the Catholic king were defeated in most of the conflicts that took place after 1586, frustrating the possibility of further large-scale expansion of the monarchy. By the end of the century, the possibility of indirect domination over the continent had completely vanished. New rivals (especially the United Provinces) and old ones (the kingdom of France) consolidated themselves and challenged the supremacy of the Spanish monarchy as the main political power, eventually displacing it after 1635 (Bennassar and Vincent 1999; Elliott 2006).

A NEW GEOPOLITICAL ORDER

The last years of the fifteenth century and the first of the sixteenth witnessed the rise of a new power in Europe, one that would show itself capable of even more radical transformation in subsequent decades. Until this juncture the Iberian peninsula did not feature prominently in the continental imagination, except as a distant theatre of conflicts against Muslim states, interminable civil wars between the different
Christian kingdoms, and—most importantly—an active player in Mediterranean politics. The expansion of the Crown of Aragon into the south of Italy from 1282 did not seem to suggest the subordination of this territory to a foreign power, since the kingdom of Sicily retained considerable autonomy. When, in the fifteenth century, the Aragonese banished from Naples a junior branch of the French royal house, their king, Alfonso V, chose to establish his court in the capital of his new kingdom, almost neglecting his patrimonial dominions. Following his death, it would fall to his illegitimate son to pursue his ambition of further conquest, thus creating a local dynasty and separating the kingdom from the Aragonese inheritance that passed to his brother Juan II.

The aggregation of new territories by the kings of Castile and Aragon proceeded in two distinct stages: 1492–1504 and 1512–1525. The year 1525 saw the end of the Muslim rebellion in Valencia (Pardo Molero 2001b), the last of the civil wars to take place during the period of the consolidation of these new sovereigns’ authority. In most of the newly acquired territories and zones of influence of the recently crowned Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V (Charles I of Spain), royal power had been imposed through violence. Civil wars and conquests had been as important as rights and inheritance in the imperial territories (Arrieta Alberdi 2009; Floristán Imízcoz 2012; Mazín Gómez and Ruiz Ibáñez 2012; Gil 2016, ch. 2). Charles and his local allies were able to carry on where his parents, the monarchs of Castile and Aragon, had left off, emerging victorious from a series of internal and foreign conflicts (Ruiz Ibáñez and Sabatini 2009). The extension of their dominions brought the Spanish rulers into the very heart of the European and Mediterranean power struggle, so that the Iberian local elites had to adapt their old strategies to the new global needs of the monarchy (Garavaglia, Braddick and Lamoroux 2016).

The need for stability in this process of integration was a clear consequence of the change in the magnitude of the challenges that they had faced individually during the last third of the fifteenth century (Boucheron et al. 2009). The kingdom of France had imposed its power over England’s traditional allies in its vicinity, incorporating the Duchy of Brittany (1491) by a marriage allegiance, the lands of some of the great feudal lords, like the Armagnac (1473) or the Anjou of Provence (1481–1487). Finally, the French kings vanquished their main rivals, the House of Burgundy, whose defeat by the Swiss (1477) led to the inclusion of the western half of the Burgundian dominions into the kingdom of France in 1482 (Potter 1993; Lecuppre-Desjardin 2016). To the east, the Ottoman Turks had overcome their own crisis of sustained growth and had consolidated their presence in the Balkans, Syria, and Egypt (1515–1517) (Sallmann 2003, chs 2–4). The pressure exerted by these blocks in different regions made it essential that the territories of the emergent Iberian monarchy be formed as a counter-weight and an entity capable of confronting Ottoman power (Ruiz Ibáñez 2014).

The French king and the Ottoman sultan would dispute Spanish Habsburg control over several regions, threatening the hold of the king-emperor and his allies over these dominions. Nonetheless, despite their great military might, neither the Turks nor the French could prevent the consolidation of the Habsburg monarchy as a polycentric and multi-territorial structure (Cardim et al. 2012). In fact, the looming threat of the Ottoman menace in particular served to accelerate the incorporation of some territories into the monarchy.
Most of the political strategies pursued by the Spanish monarchy in the 1520s and in the years between 1559 to 1578 were a consequence of the twin menace of France and the Ottoman Empire. This generated a geopolitical situation in which the interests of the incorporated territories dovetailed with those of the monarchy, which paved the way for a joint military effort. The intersection of the French and Ottoman axes that expanded towards the South of Italy made the local elites welcome the protection afforded by Spanish military power. For the Crown of Aragon, it meant the ability to mobilise Castile’s greater resources to wage its old conflict against the expansionist kingdom of France. Aragon thus gained an undoubted advantage in the opening phases of the protracted wars for the control of the Italian peninsula (1494–1504) and achieved a degree of security on its northern frontiers with the inclusion of Roussillon and Sardinia (1493). The Italian wars also prevented a possible French incursion into the Low Countries. The Flemish elite were in no doubt that their forces, even combined with those of their English and imperial allies, would not be strong enough to withstand a determined French offensive. Likewise, the Muslim principalities from Fez to Tripoli that enjoyed Spanish protection came to appreciate this military presence as a counterbalance to their traditional internal instability as well as protection against the incursions of the two new expanding powers that threatened them directly.

To the west, the new Saadi dynasty replaced the Watasi in Morocco, while in the east an even greater menace was emerging. From their strongholds in Egypt and Greece, the Turks were now poised to enter the struggle for the central Mediterranean. Their fleet had been reinforced, and by the second decade of the sixteenth century they had reached an agreement with the Barbarossa clan, the Barbary coast pirates who were proving a thorn in the side of Spain and its allies. As imperial agents backed by Ottoman resources, the Barbarossa and their local partners displaced each one of the local Muslim leaders in the region and presented a serious threat to the Hispano-Italian fleet. Even the Hafsids of Tunisia were unable to resist them. Within just a few years, the north of Africa, hitherto a vassal territory of the monarchy, had become a space of imperial conflict.

The Turkish threat thus materialised in another sphere of action, in this case far from the hereditary dominions of Charles V. However, the Battle of Mohács (1526) and the Ottoman conquest of most of the Hungarian kingdom showed that the Sublime Porte was ready to attack the territories of the Holy Roman Empire directly. Ferdinand of Habsburg (1503–1564), Charles’ brother, inherited the title of king of Hungary through his marriage with the sister of the late king, also thus obtaining rights over the Crown of Bohemia. If on one hand the dynasty found itself in a stronger position on the Danube, on the other the proximity of the formidable forces of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (or “the Lawmaker” as he was also known) (1494–1566) reduced their chances of success. The Turks were ready to advance against the Holy Roman Empire as would become clear very soon.

The Holy Roman Empire was a convoluted conglomeration of dominions under the emperor’s feudal control, which in many cases was lacking any practical authority. The great nobles (the Dukes of Saxony, Brandenburg or Bavaria, the Elector of the Palatinate), the ecclesiastical territories, the free cities, the Teutonic Order, and many small and medium-sized states competed with each other, making and breaking allegiances while paying little or no attention to imperial authority.
The emperor’s power depended in great measure on the wealth and importance of his personal estates, while the elective nature of his position meant that the question of dynastic continuity was open to interpretation. In any case, the prestige of the imperial title would not defeat the Ottoman troops, who presented an especially difficult dilemma for the monarchy given that the empire’s defensive front line was made up of Habsburg hereditary territories in the Danube valley. The small duchies of Austria, Carinthia, or Styria could not ever dream of stopping the Turks by their own means.

In order to understand the Spanish monarchy, one must consider the variety of forms of allegiance based on which different territories were incorporated, many of them not under the direct dominion of the king-emperor. There were many small territories, similar in kind to the North African sultanates, whose own interests and needs led them to seek or welcome being incorporated into the monarchy—to protect themselves or reinforce their internal stability (Ruiz Ibáñez 2014, 936–943). The leading princes of the empire were equally conscious of the dangers that French or Turkish expansion would bring, so their incorporation into the Habsburg imperial system seemed an attractive option. Sometimes the choice was a simple one—either accepting the superiority of the monarchy and its protection or integrating into its system of patronage and defence. These emerged as the means of preserving a recently acquired power or—more simply—to avoid being overcome by the Spanish forces.

Throughout the sixteenth century a number of smaller powers conserved their nominal sovereignty and a great part of their political autonomy, while operating under the monarchy’s aegis. These included the bishopric of Liège, the Duchy of Lorraine, the republics of Genoa, and, in certain respects, Ragusa (Herrero Sánchez 2016), the Duchy of Savoy, Milan, Lucca, and Parma, the knights of the Order of Saint John of Malta and the Sultanate of Tunisia or Tlemcen. Some of these polities were especially important for the Spanish monarchy, since they ensured a measure of spatial continuity between otherwise geographically dispersed dominions, while others were important due to their strategic location. To guarantee their safety (and ensure their fidelity), the Spanish king maintained fortified garrisons (presidios) in some of these regions, which boosted Spanish influence over the local governments.

This imperial presence entailed the effective incorporation into the monarchy of some dominions, the most important of which would be Lombardy in 1535 and the coast of Tuscany (the State of the Presidi, or the “presidios of Tuscany”). Generally speaking, the coincidence of interests was the basis of the stability in these allegiances, thus reinforcing the local position of an elite that would benefit from the opportunities afforded by the imperial structure. The case of the Genoese bankers is eloquent in this regard. After hesitating about whether to offer their allegiance to either Spain or France, both the Republic and the admiral Andrea Doria (1466–1560) finally decided to form an alliance with the Spanish king (1528). They collaborated in his naval actions against the Turks, allowed the passage of Spanish troops through their territory to the north of Italy, actively participating in the credit system which sustained the Spanish monarchy and profiting from it, thus obtaining a privileged position in the Spanish economy.

This coincidence of geostrategic interests with the Genoese did not seem evident from the perspective of Castile. Notwithstanding its close economic relations with
Flanders and England, the rulers of Castile had traditionally aligned themselves with the French kings. The conflicts in the Pyrenees between the latter and the Crown of Aragon appeared distant, and the war against the Ottomans in Central and Eastern Europe even more so. Had the Castilians wanted to wage a crusade, they could have done so against their Muslim neighbours.

The policies of the new Spanish monarchs changed all that. Traditional conflicts with Portugal were allowed to abate, paving the way for a marriage alliance between the ruling houses. Lisbon and Madrid negotiated over their respective spheres of influence, resulting in the Treaties of Alcáçovas (1479) and Tordesillas (1494). The limited incorporation of the kingdom of Navarre by Castile after its conquest in 1512 was King Ferdinand’s attempt to involve the Castilian Crown in his imperial geopolitical strategies (Floristán Imízcoz 2012). Members of the Castilian nobility had already glimpsed during the Italian wars the opportunities that might arise if they participated in the construction of this new Spanish monarchy. Yet the funneling of the kingdom’s resources into foreign policy commitments nevertheless elicited strong opposition from the nobility and the cities, even after the Revolt of the Comuneros (1520–1522). The Castilians could easily appreciate that the protection of northern Africa served their cause, but the need to defend the interests of the Crown of Aragon, the Flemish territories, or the German principalities was not so obvious to them. The reward for being able to use Castile’s enormous resources in the service of this expansive foreign policy was meant to be the tacit respect of the other parts of the monarchy and their allies for the Castilian commercial monopoly in the Americas, but even this was insufficient. Thus, Castile’s commitment to the reinforcement and extension of the Spanish monarchy would lead to changes in its very definition.

THE PRINCES’ WARS AND THE IMPERIAL MEANS

The 1520s established the framework for the next half a century. The Spanish monarchy was not without its problems, but it was sufficiently sturdy to rebuff the various attempts at expansion by the king of France in Flanders and the Iberian peninsula. In Italy, the imperial forces not only consolidated their possessions in the south of the peninsula, but also forced the French out of Lombardy and repulsed Francis I’s subsequent offensives aimed at this territory and Genoa. The victory at the Battle of Pavia (1525) was the crowning success of this new policy. The king of France was captured, and the Treaty of Madrid forced him to make a number of major concessions to Charles V (Hamon 1995). To the east, the combined forces assembled by the emperor were able to resist Ottoman attacks in and beyond Hungary, fighting back two sieges of Vienna (1529 and 1532). The concentration of his rivals’ resources on specific fronts relieved the tension in other frontier regions (Flanders or the Pyrenees), which was evidence of the effective use of the military resources at the king-emperor’s disposal.

There were, nonetheless, other lessons to be learned in this decade. Imperial power was maintained in those territories where the pact with the elites was solid enough and the king could mobilise enough resources. This was the case in Naples or Austria, and even in Milan, where the ducal house, the Sforza, was completely dependent upon imperial power. Yet, in those territories where the accord was more
limited in nature or unstable, the monarchy was sometimes barely able to maintain its presence or to provide support to its allies. The Turks, their defeats at Vienna’s gates notwithstanding, remained entrenched in Hungary. Furthermore, the monarchy showed little capacity for weakening its principal enemies from within. This underlined not only the limited nature of imperial resources but also the internal cohesion that the kingdom of France and the Ottoman Empire had developed.

The king of France was able to maintain his authority despite some major setbacks—the rebellion of the leading French nobleman, which was encouraged by Charles V in 1523; the king’s own imprisonment after Pavia; and the terms of the peace treaties (Jouanna 2013). The triumph at Pavia had set off alarm bells in the small Italian states, and the subalpine peninsula was once again shaken by war between the French and the imperial forces—although after 1530 it seemed clear that the Spanish monarchy, still under the leadership of Emperor Charles, was solidly entrenched in both the southern kingdoms and in the Po Valley. The possession of the imperial title had allowed Charles, once the Sforza dynasty had been extinguished, to give the Duchy of Milan to his son, Prince Philip, in 1535. This feudal superiority allowed the king-emperor to appropriate other dominions to give more cohesion to the Low Countries, under the same policy of concentration used previously by the House of Burgundy.

Besides consolidating its hold on these crucial territories, the Spanish monarchy nevertheless seemed incapable of inflicting lasting damage on its rivals. The attempts to recuperate the Duchy of Burgundy after the peace of Madrid, the expedition to Provence in 1535, and the intention to reclaim Metz were all failures. To be sure, the incursion into Champagne in 1543 forced the king of France to sign the peace and to renounce his ambitions beyond the Alps as well as his claims on Flanders. However, since French royal power remained entirely intact, it was only a question of time before the king again forged allegiances with Charles V’s rivals with the aim of challenging imperial supremacy in certain key territories. As late as 1557, the French army, with the support of the Pope, tried unsuccessfully to evict the Spanish from Naples. Things did not turn out any better with the Ottoman Turks. While it was evident that the Habsburg monarchy was losing control over the central Mediterranean (Battle of Preveza, 1538), the attempts to retaliate by striking at the Sultan’s own territories and promote a Greek-Albanian rebellion did not succeed in either Coron in 1532–1534, or in Castelnuovo (Herceg Novi, Montenegro) in 1539. The Turks not only preserved their forces and domains in the Balkans, but they also seemed unstoppable in the Maghreb. The emperor personally led two expeditions to try to impede this advance and to help his weakened allies. Following a victory in Tunisia in 1535 and a defeat in Algiers in 1541, Charles never recovered the military initiative. Meanwhile, the Hafṣids in Tunisia and the Saadis in Morocco were involved in continual disputes that hindered any assistance they might otherwise have offered against the Sultan’s forces. By the beginning of the 1560s, Iberian power in the north of Africa appeared to have waned considerably. And things would only get worse.

Nevertheless, we should not disregard the triumphs of the Habsburg monarchy. Despite bringing to bear all their respective resources against it, the Turks and the French were unable to prevail. Their frustration was so great that they endeavoured, between in 1536 and 1542, to join their forces against Charles V. This collaboration can be seen as a clear recognition of their own military limitations and of the
capacities of the Spanish monarchy. The so-called “Unholy Alliance” paradoxically reinforced the Habsburgs’ ethos, as Charles V could henceforth present himself and his subjects as the true leaders of Christendom against the “common enemy”, a tactic that also adversely affected the prestige of his French rival. Yet even when the Ottoman fleet wintered in French ports and cooperated with their navy (1543–1544), this collaboration did not bring about a real change in the balance of power. In reality, both emperor and sultan faced too many problems to think of extending their disputes beyond the Mediterranean. Both were trying to encourage or incite the enemies of their rival so as to preserve their own resources.

The decreasing threat in the Danube valley, despite the sporadic skirmishes between the Habsburg and the Ottoman armies, reduced the need for the German princes to unite their forces. The great nobility resented the attempts by Charles V to fulfil his imperial mission. He was the first emperor in centuries who had both the military force at his disposal and the desire to impose his feudal authority. These political tensions were compounded by religious divisions, since the Protestant Reformation had been supported by a part of the high nobility that did not accept the emperor’s right to interfere in their dominions. The war of the Schmalkaldic league (1546–1547) ended in a decisive triumph for the imperial forces that vanquished a confederation of Protestant nobles in the Battle of Mülbergh (1547). However, the sense of victory, and with it the prospect of reuniting Catholics and Protestants, as well as the possibility of turning the empire into a monarchy less dependent on nobility very soon dissipated. In 1552, a part of the German nobility stirred up a rebellion with French backing. Lacking the resources to prolong the struggle, the emperor had little choice but to recognise the nobility’s autonomy, and his successor had to accept, by the Peace of Augsburg (1554), their right to define religion in their dominions. By this point, the transformation of the empire into an effective monarchy was an almost complete failure.

CONSTRUCTING A MONARCHY

Already by the end of the 1550s, the Habsburg monarchy seemed to have established a solid territorial base. The kingdom of France, conscious of its vulnerability to the north after the Spanish victory at Saint Quentin (1557) had to renounce its Italian aspirations in the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559). The Spanish monarchy was constituted by three major spaces, separate but interconnected: the Italian regions, where imperial power was reinforced by the subordination of a series of minor powers; the Low Countries that, though they were part of the empire as the Burgundian Circle, had achieved a greater juridical and political unity under Charles V; and finally, the territories of the Iberian peninsula, with a structural alliance with the Crown of Portugal, that had a shared interest with Castile in maintaining their respective Atlantic monopolies. The loss of the imperial title in favour of a junior branch of the House of Habsburg was in fact a relief for the Spanish monarchy, now able to extradite itself from some of the confessional strife that plagued the empire and focus instead on the Turkish menace on the Danube and elsewhere.

The defence of the monarchy’s interests in these different territories was possible due to the mobilisation of resources by the king-emperor as sovereign of each region. Yet there were limits to this mobilization. It is crucial to remember that
in most parts of the monarchy the system of defence was organised by the local powers, by the nobilities and the cities through their armed corporations. The reliance on local forces meant that military requirements were defined according to the vulnerability of each dominion to external assault, and thus limited the offensive capacity of the monarchy (Ruiz Ibáñez 2009; Prak 2015). The king’s armies were made up of professional troops, recruited from his subjects and under noble leadership, as well as by mercenaries of the most varied origin (Martínez Ruiz 2008). The navy was made up of ships financed directly by the royal government, by squadrons hired from major entrepreneurs (Genoese, Ragusan, Flemish, among others), and by private fleets mustered for the occasion. War was expensive, and ideally the royal armies would have been maintained with the fiscal contributions collected by the sovereign from his subjects, or, more commonly, loans advanced against such future contributions. It is not surprising that in all the territories of the monarchy there was significant resistance to the fiscal burdens imposed in order to finance the king’s global policies, just as there was usually opposition to contributing to wars that did not directly benefit the particular territory in question. There was a constant fear that each new fiscal concession would destabilise the local balance of power in favour of the prince (Pardo Molero 2001a).

The imperial government had little choice. Even during the first half of the sixteenth century, war among princes was seen as an exceptional state of affairs, and so contributions were also understood to be “extraordinary”. Consequently, military
effort could only be sustained for a short time, and confrontations against the French and the Turks were thus interrupted by truces and periods of peace. Despite the great quantity of resources mobilised, the various contenders had to repeatedly reconstruct their credit systems. This situation generated intermittent but perennial conflicts. None of the great powers had the force to deal a decisive blow to their rivals, and each individual triumph was offset by a change of allegiance among the minor powers, such as the kingdom of England, the republic of Venice, the Papacy or even German nobility. The imperial needs brought about an expansion of the fiscal regime and this had direct political consequences.

The continuous mobilisations of Charles V were due in part to the need to renegotiate frequently the concession of new services or the total sum of taxation. The sovereign’s presence brought about a political dialogue with the elites through which these groups agreed to new fiscal concessions, albeit reluctantly. The monarchy was usually able to hold firm in these negotiations. In contrast to what happened in Germany, in the Low Countries the government of Charles V could withstand resistance as it was dispersed. On the one hand, the city of Ghent was ruthlessly repressed (1539); on the other hand, the resistance of the Dukes of Gueldres (Charles d’Egmont and William of Jülich-Cleve-Berg) ended with the annexation of their lands into the Habsburg domains in the Low Countries (1543).

The need to secure a constant flow of income in order to mobilise the necessary military resources forced the monarchy to redefine itself, especially after the 1530s. After the War of the Comuneros, the emperor redoubled his efforts to consolidate his relationship with his Castilian subjects, still uneasy with their integration into his global geopolitical strategy. Charles V took a decisive step of shoring up the entente with Portugal through his marriage (1526), and subsequently entrusted his wife, the capable Empress Isabel, with the governorship of the peninsula. During his stays in Spain between 1525 and 1539, the emperor could negotiate with the Cortes of Castile a fixed sum of taxes (alcabalas), which allowed him to maintain a firm and consistent international policy. It seemed clear that along with Italy, Castile, with the Indies duly integrated, would become the main purse of the monarchy. To effectively mobilise the resources in the service of this joint imperial enterprise, the government had to transform itself.

The way to involve Castile in this project, and by extension to encourage the three other Iberian Crowns to do so, was to Hispanise the monarchy, appointing Spaniards—not only Castilians, but also Aragonese, Catalans, and after 1580, Portuguese—to high offices. The royal entourage, the diplomacy, and the upper echelons of the central and territorial administrations thus boasted an increasing number of Spanish office holders. This was an unmistakable tendency from the 1520s onward. There was a gradual homogenisation of the principal agents of the king-emperor, as the posts of royal counsellors, viceroys, ambassadors, and (not to be forgotten) city governors were granted to his Spanish subjects. Even the royal household became more Hispanic, especially after Charles’ son and successor fixed his residence in the Iberian peninsula after 1560. A phenomenon that became clearly perceptible in the last decades of Charles’ reign and would thus intensify under Philip II.

The use of Iberian resources to support imperial hegemony had been evident since the beginning of the Italian wars. But during the conflicts of the 1540s, the backbone of the king-emperor’s armies, in France and in the empire, was the Spanish infantry,
organised in tercios. The tercios were professional troops, recruited voluntarily from all ranks of society. These soldiers were more trustworthy and more effective than mercenaries and even more reliable than armed nobility. The limited number of these seasoned veterans meant that the “old infantry” was transferred from one front to another, from one war to another, and contributed to creating a global perception of a monarchy led by the Spanish nation, which included the inhabitants of all the kingdoms of the peninsula. The term “King of Spain” became common outside of the monarchy’s frontiers and soon defined not only the sovereign but monarchy itself.

This transformation enabled the growth of the fiscal system in Castile, whose population was in turn compensated with opportunities in the global management of the monarchy. Yet in the medium term, the result was devastating. The flow of resources out of Castile towards Europe, and the assumption of debts, contributed to the decapitalisation of Castile—a region that at the beginning of the century had been one of the most economically dynamic areas of the continent.

By 1560, two key processes had been completed: the conversion of the Habsburg monarchy into the Spanish monarchy and its consolidation as a stable political and military structure. The resources extracted from Spain and the Indies maintained a vast military network, linked by the fleets of Mediterranean galleys and the vessels of Flanders that moved troops between the Flemish and the Italian theatres of war (Yun Casalilla 2004; Marcos Martín 2006).

One of the outcomes of this process was the large-scale circulation of royal servants and officers of all ranks across the territories of the monarchy—and these figures in turn gained experience of government and military organisation in different regions and circumstances (Yun Casalilla 2008). Yet a mechanical model of a central power projecting itself over the peripheries has to be questioned. The king’s decisions were applied by local elites and their collaboration was dependent upon the extent to which royal policy matched their own interests, this in turn being necessary to maintain a modicum of consensus among their own populations. In these vast territories, there were many centres of decision-making, and the effective government of the monarchy depended on the maintenance of this polycentric arrangement (Cardim et al. 2012).

Following its disentanglement from the Holy Roman Empire in 1554, and the peace with France, the Spanish monarchy once again had to face the Turkish menace in the Mediterranean from the 1560s. The long conflict between the two empires was finally settled in the centre of the Mediterranean. The Sultan and the Catholic king reaffirmed their supremacy in the regions each one controlled (the conquest of Cyprus in 1570, and around the same time, the repression of the Morisco rebellion of the Alpujarras). Again, neither of the two powers could inflict lasting damage on its rival, so, from 1578, both having reached a state of exhaustion, they had to find a status quo that would allow them to pursue other political priorities. Nevertheless, the great prestige gained by the Spanish King Philip II due to his triumphs over the Turks should not be overlooked. The lifting of the siege of Malta (1565) proved that the latter could be checked, while the battle of Lepanto (7 October 1571) showed that they could even be defeated—and that a Christian power could confront them directly and survive. For Philip II’s subjects and for many Europeans it left no doubts regarding who had the right to claim the true leadership of Christendom. Moreover,
this was taking place at a time when this leadership would be defined not only by Christendom’s external enemies, but also by its internal ones.

**IMPERIAL EBB AND FLOW**

By the middle of the sixteenth century, the expansion of the Protestant Reformation and the tensions generated by the growing fiscal demands of the monarchies had weakened the internal stability of the states. As the religious function was considered to be the central characteristic of royal dignity, these sovereigns could not, in principle, tolerate dissidence. The success of the German nobility had demonstrated that religion was a means of generating sufficient unity to articulate political rebellions against a sovereign power that acted against local privileges. These tensions sprang up everywhere, weakening the effective power that kings had. The Habsburg-Valois wars had ended with the peace of Cateau-Cambrésis. A new period now began in which European politics would be settled in civil wars. In these conflicts, the Catholic king would emerge as a powerful ally that would link his help to prospective rebels with the monarchy’s program of expansion. In European politics, confessionalisation would be the vehicle of a new form of supremacy that would lead to greater Spanish influence in the continent, but also to its failure.

The Spanish monarchy was not without internal tensions of its own. The rebellion in the Low Countries from 1566 to 1568 and the War of the Alpujarras showed the monarchy’s desire for rigid control of the religion of its subjects, a situation that would eventually generate dynamics of rebellion. For the elites in these regions, royal actions were seen as an abuse of power, an intolerable interference well outside their authority and power. The so-called *Alteraciones* of Aragon (1591) showed that these opposition movements did not necessarily have a confessional dimension, but they conveyed the dissatisfaction of the local institutions against the exercise of royal authority in their territory.

Political instability became a generalised phenomenon. In France, after the death of Henry II (1533–1559), the government of his sons and widow was unable to put a stop to the conflict between the great Catholic and Protestant noble coalitions. In Scotland, Queen Mary Stuart (1542–1587) was forced by the Protestant nobles in 1567 to abandon the country, while in England, the ascension of Elizabeth (1533–1603) to the throne compelled the Catholics to enter the ranks of the opposition, strengthening the position of Irish nobility. Political weakness and instability in France allowed the Spanish monarchy to present itself as the political leader of the continent. In Italy, an important part of the dominions strived to maintain good relations with the Catholic king. Rome and Venice reluctantly accepted this situation since they had common interests with the monarchy, and in any case could not compete against it, and had no other options. As a result, in the second half of the sixteenth century the Iberian and Italian peninsulas enjoyed an extraordinary period of stability.

The forces of the Spanish monarchy were nevertheless very limited. The royal armies had to move between the Mediterranean wars and the desperate attempts to subdue the “rebels” in Flanders. By 1578 the results seemed limited and frustrating: the royal forces had almost vanished from the Low Countries, while in the Mediterranean a cessation of hostilities against the Turks now seemed urgent, with
the loss of influence over Tunisia. Yet, freed from these burdens, the king could concentrate his resources in Portugal. After the death of the King Dom Sebastian in the Battle of Ksar el-Kebir, Philip II had strong hereditary rights over the kingdom. Thanks to both diplomacy and the force of arms, Portugal and its empire were incorporated into the monarchy between 1580 and 1583 (Bouza Álvarez 2010, ch. 1; Cardim 2014). Next it was the turn of the Low Countries, where the king’s nephew, Alessandro Farnese (1545–1592), at the head of the army in Flanders, re-established royal authority in the Southern Provinces (1583–1586) (Soen 2012).

These Spanish triumphs alarmed neighbouring rival monarchies, who tried to impede them: two French armadas were sent to help the enemies of Philip II in the Azores islands, while the Duke of Anjou (1555–1584), the heir to the French throne, accepted the title of sovereign in the Low Countries, consented to by the rebels resisting the Spanish forces (1580–1584). But it was all in vain. The pirate attacks, although a nuisance, never caused serious harm to the Spanish imperial structure outside Europe, just as the English expeditionary force—sent by Elizabeth to the Low Countries after the Treaty of Nonsuch (1585)—could not defeat Farnese’s troops.

What made this string of military successes possible? The incorporation of Portugal, the reintegration of the southern Low Countries, and the repression of the Aragonese uprising were accomplished thanks to the assent of a notable segment of the local elites, and in some cases their active collaboration. As a result of this, the territories incorporated into the monarchy retained their privileges and autonomy. The pacts thus formed were so enduring that when their respective territories were once again attacked (Portugal in 1589 and Flanders after 1594), the actions of the local armed forces were the decisive factor in maintaining these territories under the control of the Catholic king.

The monarchy’s protective aegis was not only welcomed by the territories that were traditionally associated with it. From 1578, a series of dynastic crises in Western Europe, in some cases coupled with religious conflicts, created new opportunities. The deaths of Dom Sebastian, the Duke of Anjou, and Mary Stuart—executed on the order of her cousin Elizabeth—left few alternatives from the perspective of many Portuguese, (Catholic) French, and English. For many Catholics, the Protestant kings or the heirs to the thrones of England (and Ireland), Scotland, and France were considered illegitimate. This situation offered new possibilities to the Spanish monarchy to influence the succession of those crowns, or even to secure them for a member of the Habsburg royal family and incorporate the territories directly into the monarchy.

The appeals for help directed at the Catholic king came from as far afield as the Balkans and North Africa. From the second half of the 1580s, external intervention as a means of imperial expansion seemed quite feasible, and not only offered Madrid a unique political opportunity but also the resources to control the rebels’ lands of origin. The various resistance movements and civil war factions were coalitions whose aims were often different, and in many cases even opposed to one another’s. Each group saw Spanish help as a way of achieving its own objectives, seeing the monarchy’s potential role from the perspective of their own political culture and context (Gil 2002, 2004, and 2009). The image of the monarchy was that of a liberating power, a necessary partner to win their own civil conflicts and develop their
political projects, which did not necessarily coincide with those of the Spanish king (Hillgarth 2000; Ruiz Ibáñez 2014, 947–948).

The forces of the Catholic king proved to be incapable of satisfying so many demands. The army of Flanders could provide up to 35,000 highly trained soldiers for the battlefield. It was as impressive as it was expensive, but clearly not enough to impose Spanish supremacy in the northern Low Countries or put an end to the French civil war that began as a succession conflict in 1589, or indeed to conquer England. The Spanish intervention in France (1590–1594) could not defeat the army of Henry IV of Bourbon and decide the outcome of the war. The monarchy’s fleet could not destroy the English navy, nor could it land an army in England (Armadas of 1588, 1596, and 1597). The small Irish-Spanish contingent could not prevail over the English forces on the island (Kinsale, 1601). Moreover, the need to redirect its resources to these engagements meant that the Spanish army had to cease its offensives against the Dutch.

Even worse, Spanish influence accelerated the disintegration of resistance movements as the expectations of many of their members were frustrated. The active anti-Spanish propaganda successfully labelled them as nothing but the agents of a foreign power. The apparent strength of the Spanish monarchy reinforced the ties of allegiance between its enemies leading to an agreement of military collaboration (Treaty of Greenwich, 1596). In their counterattacks they were sustained by the Papacy, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, the republic of Venice, the sultan of Morocco, and the Ottoman Empire. The monarchy, whose military capabilities remained robust, stood up well to the attacks, and despite some notable victories, such as the Anglo-Dutch seizure of Cadiz of 1596, its enemies were not only unable to harm the imperial structure, but suffered a number of defeats at the hands of the Army of Flanders (1595–1596).

A series of peace agreements between 1598 and 1609 led to a cessation of hostilities on these different fronts. The regimes consolidated in the British Isles, the United Provinces, and France had been able to stabilise their countries and incorporate most of the dissident forces. The most radical elements had been marginalised, tainted by association with the Spanish monarchy, and in many cases forced into exile.

The communities of refugees in the monarchy, quite visible in the 1570s, were consolidated thanks to a system of assistance set up by the Catholic king. After 1600, the numerous French, English, Irish, Scotch, and Dutch exiles no longer expected to reconquer their territories with Spanish help, but simply tried to reassess their own political projects as subjects of the Catholic king and help their coreligionists in their lands of origin. It was in these communities of foreigners where the most universalistic and radical discourses developed, ones that depicted what the Catholic king should be like (Janssens 2014; Ruiz Ibáñez and Pérez Tostado 2015).

The Spanish monarchy had survived as the principal continental power, and this situation would continue without much change until 1635, though the Spanish power was no longer considered to be a global force that was a threat to the territorial integrity of its main rivals. The cost of the great power politics of the period 1580 to 1600 for Castile and Italy had been overwhelming and accelerated the problems of excessive indebtedness, decapitalisation, and, consequently, the complete exhaustion of society. A sense of grandeur and a longing of glory would still weigh heavily in Spanish culture in the following century (Marcos Martín 2006).
For the duration of the seventeenth century the monarchy would have to confront old and new enemies that were not only capable of mounting effective resistance, but now actually began to encroach on its spheres of influence. The Ottoman Empire no longer appeared as an aggressive rival, but the United Provinces and England had not only foreclosed the possibility of integration into the Iberian territories and their diplomatic networks but had begun to challenge the Spanish overseas monopolies. France was still the most populous kingdom of Europe, and so once it finally overcame its internal divisions it would resume hostilities until its triumph in 1659. The monarchy’s resources and structure would prove to be insufficient to maintain its preponderance in Europe. A process of disintegration began, above all in 1640–1660 and 1700–1714, with the separation from the Portuguese empire and the division of territories that had once belonged to the Spanish monarchy.

NOTE

1 This study represents one part of a broader research project entitled “Hispanofilia IV: Los mundos ibéricos frente a las oportunidades de proyección exterior y a sus dinámicas interiores”, HAR2017-82791-C2-1-P, Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades. Translated by Gabriela Vallejo Cervantes.

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