Philip II

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From World History in Context

**Born:** May 21, 1527 in Valladolid, Spain  
**Died:** September 13, 1598 in El Escorial, Spain  
**Other Names:** Philip II; Philip II of Spain  
**Nationality:** Spanish  
**Occupation:** King

Regent of Spain (1545-1556), king of Spain (1556-1598)

The only surviving son of the emperor Charles V and Isabella of Portugal, Philip began governing Spain as regent, in his father's absence, from 1543. In 1548-1551 he made a historic tour of Italy, southern Germany, and the Netherlands, which gave him practical experience of European politics and a permanent taste for Flemish and Italian Renaissance culture. Philip was married four times: in 1543 to Maria of Portugal (d. 1545), mother of Don Carlos; in 1554 to Mary I of England (d. 1558); in 1560 to Elizabeth of Valois (d. 1568), mother of the infants Isabella and Catalina; in 1570 to Anna of Austria (d. 1580), mother of the next king, Philip III.

**Imperial Commitments**

As husband of Mary I and joint ruler (during her lifetime only) of the kingdom of England, Philip spent little more than a year there before going to the Netherlands to assist at Charles V's abdication and participate in his father's wars against France. He took part in the campaign leading to the notable victory of Saint-Quentin (1557) and negotiated the peace of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559), but the spread of the Reformation threatened to bring instability to the realms he inherited at his father's abdication in 1556: Spain, America, the Netherlands, Franche-Comté, and the Italian possessions (mainly Naples and Milan). Undecided about the application of force against heresy in England (where he was unenthusiastic about the Marian persecution) and the Netherlands (where he spent more than four years, 1554-1559), Philip supported the full use of the Inquisition against Protestant groups in Spain (1558-1562), to which he returned finally in 1559.

Philip attempted to reform the structure and finances of the government in Castile, but the serious debts left by Charles V, which had forced Philip to suspend treasury payments in 1557, continued to provoke further suspensions (1560, 1576, 1596). Most expenditure went to war and to building ships in the Mediterranean. The major threat was the Turks, who inflicted a severe defeat on Spanish forces at Djerba (1560) but were checked by a Spanish force that relieved Malta (1565); subsequently, the Spanish-Italian forces of the Holy League won a striking naval victory over the Turks at Lepanto (1571). The long-term problem with gravest implications was the revolt of the Netherlands, which Philip hoped to crush by tough measures (through the duke of Alba in 1567-1573), but which resisted all possible solutions, caused spiraling costs, and invited military intervention by both the French and the English. The revolt (known to the Dutch as the Eighty Years’ War) was led from the late 1570s by William of Orange.
When Portugal faced a succession crisis as the result of the death of King Sebastian in battle in Africa (1578), France and Spain showed their interest by supporting Antonio of Crato as the next ruler. This made Philip decide to invade the country (1580) in support of his own claim to the throne. Fixing his capital at Lisbon, he soon decided that England was the principal threat to Spanish interests in both America and Europe. Plots against Elizabeth of England, fostered by the Spanish ambassador in favor of Mary Stuart, were revealed and led to Mary's execution (1587). By then Philip had already decided to attempt an invasion of England, but the result was the costly failure of the Armada (1588). His military commitments--essential to maintaining Spain's global empire, which by the 1580s included the Philippines and most of South America--affected the country's already limited economic capacity. In the 1580s Philip also intervened militarily in France in order to prevent a Protestant succession there. Despite some gains in western Europe (such as the recovery of Antwerp by the troops of Alessandro Farnese in 1585) most of the ventures toward the end of Philip's reign tended to be unproductive.

**Domestic Problems**

Residing continuously in the Iberian Peninsula from 1559, Philip dedicated himself assiduously to the tasks of government. He reformed the structure of the treasury, negotiated tax agreements with the Cortes (assembly), restructured the central administration to allow more effective control of war, built up a Mediterranean fleet, and supervised the holding of church provincial councils (1565) to improve the state of religion. Before him the crown had no significant court and no capital city; in 1561 he chose Madrid as the site for both. A firm enemy of rebellion, he was ruthless to those who participated in the Morisco uprising in the kingdom of Granada (1569-1570), but he also firmly respected the autonomy of his different peninsular realms, attended their Cortes, and visited all his provincial capitals. Though the non-Castilian provinces were tranquil under his reign, tensions increased in Castile during the latter part of it. From the 1570s taxation rose in Castile and the king began to be criticized by his own people; the Armada failure made further taxes necessary and provoked riots. In 1591 he was also faced by disturbances in Aragon stirred up by his former secretary Antonio Pérez, who had been under arrest for murder since 1579 but escaped and attempted to incite rebellion against the king.

**Reputation and Achievement**

Despite his diligence as a ruler, his reputation did not survive untarnished--the repression of rebels in the Netherlands and the subsequent Armada campaign provoked a tide of hostile propaganda from the English and the Dutch. Enemies abroad spread sinister stories of his killing his son Don Carlos and his own wife, Elizabeth of Valois; Protestants created bizarre legends of his tyranny, his lugubrious court, his hostility to free thought. Even in Castle his ministers criticized his bureaucratic devotion to paperwork. A more favorable view was taken of his achievements as patron of the arts. He restored and constructed palaces, of which the greatest was the palace-monastery of the Escorial (1563-1584); developed landscape gardens for the first time in Spain (the supreme example was in Aranjuez); supported the leading painters of the Netherlands (notably Antonis Mor, known as Antonio Moro), Spain (excepting only El Greco), and Italy; and invited foreign musicians to court. He financed a new polyglot version of the Bible (directed by the Hebraist Arias Montanus), built up a unique collection of rare books and manuscripts, financed historical and scientific studies of his various
realms, and ordered (with limited success) geographical surveys to be made of Castile and America. His artistic preferences when young are reflected in the sensual series known as the Poésies by Titian; later paintings he commissioned were meant for solemn palaces and are religious in tone.

An unswerving Catholic, Philip permitted himself sexual lapses when younger; when older, he was unbending in religious matters but no fanatic, even supporting modification of the "purity of blood" regulations that discriminated against people of Jewish origin and accepting (reluctantly) the necessity for some toleration in the Netherlands. An ardent promoter of church reform, he was in great measure responsible for the success of the last sessions of the Council of Trent (ended 1564), but he also consistently opposed those papal policies with which he disagreed. A firm believer in the efficacy of the Inquisition, he supported all its actions (including even the arrest of the archbishop of Toledo, Bartolomé Carranza, in 1559) and used it in Aragon in 1592 to punish supporters of Antonio Pérez, but it played no significant part in his system of government.

Reputed in his lifetime and later to be an "absolute" ruler, Philip neither claimed to be one nor ever made decisions alone, always relying on his advisers for support; in 1586 he downgraded his own status by ordering that he be addressed as "Sir" and not as "Majesty." A negative personal image extended into mythical depictions of him as a recluse (in fact, after his father he was the most widely traveled of all the Habsburg rulers of Spain). He was inevitably blamed for the failures of his reign: the Armada, the wars, the taxes, and inflation. However, his reign was subsequently dubbed a "golden age," not so much for its imperialist ventures as for its striking achievements in art, literature, and architecture, most of them derived from contact with Renaissance civilization. The roots of Spain's contact with the Renaissance lay in preceding reigns, but under Philip they were substantially extended, always with foreign help: the printing press (pioneered in Seville, Barcelona, and Valencia by northern Europeans) offered new editions to readers; poets (Juan Boscán) imitated Italianate forms; painters went to Italy to be trained. To develop his palaces Philip invited a stream of Italian architects, artists, and decorators to Spain, and virtually all the technological improvements of his reign were carried out under the aegis of northern European or Italian engineers. The most striking of the many portraits of Philip are by Titian, done in Augsburg (1551; held by the Prado), and by Antonis Mor, done in England (1554; held by the Bilbao Art Museum). El Greco included Philip in his Adoration of the Name of Jesus (1580; held by the Escorial; see the color plates in this volume).

- Philip II, King of Spain, depicted by Titian

Further Readings

Bibliography
