

# The Decline of Habsburg Spain and the Thirty Years' War

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## *Abstract*

The Thirty Years' War put an end to Habsburg Spain's hegemony. In historical literature surrounding its rule (1516-1700), it is often assumed that the House of Habsburg was overconfident in winning a war against its main adversaries. By critically engaging with the literature, this paper finds that Spain's intervention was fuelled by a realisation of its waning power. By aiding their Austrian allies, however, Spain would in turn facilitate the ascension of France as the new dominant power in Europe.

**Keywords:** Spain, Thirty Years' War, Hegemony, France, Balance of Power

## *Introduction*

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) has had a significant impact on European history. Often, the conflict is depicted as the last biggest and most decisive confrontation between Catholicism and Protestantism.<sup>1</sup> However, it was not only a religious war but also a political one, leading to a profound shift of power in Europe. In the years leading up to the war, Spain was the uncontested hegemon. After the war, however, France became the dominant power in Europe, with Spain's influence shrinking to that of a second-tier power. Almost all nations of Europe were involved in the conflict. The Catholic faction, headed by the Habsburg family, controlled large parts of Europe, such as Austria and Spain.<sup>2</sup> The Protestant faction included, but was not limited to, Bohemia, the Palatinate, Sweden, and France. Starting as a religious war between Bohemia and Austria, it quickly turned into a geopolitical conflict with its primary aim to end Habsburg hegemony.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focusses on Spain's involvement in the Thirty Years' War. More specifically, it addresses the question: "Was the involvement of Spain in the war the cause or the result of its decline?" To answer this, the paper first looks at Spain's position as a hegemon before the start of the conflict. The second part discusses the reasons behind the Thirty Years' War. In the third part, the paper outlines the motives behind Spanish intervention in the conflict. In the final part, it focusses on why Spain lost the Thirty Years' War and the consequences thereof.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter H. Wilson, *Europe's Tragedy: A New History of the Thirty Years War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 787.

<sup>2</sup> These territories included Bohemia, parts of Hungary, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Kingdom of Naples, Milan and the islands of Corsica and Sardinia. Furthermore, the Austrian and Spanish lands were ruled by the same family.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 512

### ***Spanish Power in the Years Before the Thirty Years' War***

From 1516 to 1659, Spain was the uncontested hegemon, controlling an enormous territory that ranged from Europe to its colonies in the Americas.<sup>4</sup> Its military power was superior, with the Tercio being the most powerful infantry unit and in economic terms, Spanish coffers were always ready to sway influential people in foreign countries. While the reign of Philip II (1556 – 1598) saw an increase of Spanish power in the Mediterranean,<sup>5</sup> their foreign policy in Northern Europe was not so successful: the Dutch were in open revolt and Spain was at war with England. Furthermore, the continued conflicts in which Spain engaged had left the treasury empty.<sup>6</sup>

Under Philip III's reign (1598-1621), the situation deteriorated further. During most of Philip II's reign, France had been divided due to civil war. The coronation of Henry IV (1589) marked a return of stability to France, ending the era in which Spain was the uncontested hegemon.<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to make Spain the sole hegemon once again, Philip III sought to neutralize France, claim victory over the British and crush the Dutch rebels. He did not succeed in any of these attempts

Spain had an interest in a 'neutral' France, as it needed to go over lands under French influence to reach its territories in the Netherlands. Before Dutch and English domination at sea, Spain transported its troops to the Netherlands by boat, as this proved to be more reliable.<sup>8</sup> Loss of naval supremacy after the battle in which the Spanish Armada was destroyed (1588) meant a land route was needed. This road started in Southern Italy, moved over the Alps to arrive in the Spanish Netherlands, and was called the "Spanish Road". Spain could freely move their troops on this road to fight the Dutch rebels and needed not to worry about France which was embroiled in a religious civil war. Most principedoms along the route needed or feared Spain, thus they allowed Spanish troops to cross their territories.<sup>9</sup> This resulted in a safe, easy and fast passage.<sup>10</sup> However, political stabilization in France meant that local powers became less dependent on Spain for their security. This exposed the Spanish Road to a new force and the rulers along it to a new temptation. Additionally, France's re-emergence as power and its subsequent ability to patronize Spain made clear the hatred in the Italian peninsula towards Spain. An example of this is to be found in Venice's action to openly declare in favour of Henry IV as opposed to Philip III.<sup>11</sup> This revival of France resulted in a decrease in Spanish influence on both the Italian peninsula and the Netherlands, as a result of diminished access to their Spanish Road.<sup>12</sup>

The second enemy that stood in the way of Spanish interests was England. The Anglo-Spanish war started over the former's throne. Incorporating the English throne into the Habsburg lands, along with its extensive navy and geographic position, would make Dutch

<sup>4</sup> Vassilis K. Fouskas, *The Politics of International Political Economy*(London: Routledge, 2014), 120.

<sup>5</sup> Cathal J. Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion, 1000-1650: Encyclopedia of Global Warfare and Civilization, Volume 2*(Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing, 2006), 529.

<sup>6</sup> Philip T. Hoffman, Kathryn Norberg, *Fiscal Crises, Liberty, and Representative Government 1450-1789*(Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2001), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. Knecht, *The French Wars of Religion 1559-1598*(London: Longman, 1996), 272.

<sup>8</sup> Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 65.

<sup>9</sup> Diego de Quiroga, L. J. Reeve, "Quiroga's Paper of 1631: A Missing Link in Anglo-Spanish Diplomacy during the Thirty Years War," *The English Historical Review* 101, no. 401 (1986): 920.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road 1567-1659: The Logistics of Spanish Victory and Defeat in the Low Countries' Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 231.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (Sydney: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 44.

<sup>12</sup> Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road 1567-1659*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 252.

resistance untenable, Philip III argued, whilst also closing the encirclement of France.<sup>13</sup> Spain, however, lost the war, providing them with the opportunity to settle the Dutch question, as it freed up resources and troops.<sup>14</sup>

The third obstacle in Spain's re-emergence as hegemon were the Dutch 'rebels'. The war between the Dutch and Spaniards had proven more devastating for the latter. Firstly, while the Dutch economy was booming, Spanish income dwindled.<sup>15,16</sup> Secondly, a reorganization of the Dutch military meant that they were capable of fending off attacks, whilst Spain struggled to find adequate men due to having to fight wars on multiple fronts.<sup>17</sup> As Madrid was not in the capacity to fully commit to the war anymore, they called for a cessation of hostilities.<sup>18</sup>

With the end of conflicts between Spain and its enemies, a *Pax Hispanica* was established in Europe. Paradoxically, whilst Spain had been defeated, its stance as a hegemon kept untouched: it had temporarily lost its possessions around the English Channel, yet its colonial territories kept growing; the Spanish economy was in a significant downturn, yet it spent large portions on maintaining an image of wealth through the construction of expensive palaces and churches; it lost all its wars to logistical constraints and strategic errors, yet the level of training of its military and its weaponry were unmatched.<sup>19,20,21</sup> Whilst in the decade after 1610, Philip III still seemed to rule the world, his power had become very fragile. In many parts of the Spanish Empire people vied for revenge: in Flanders and Italy, people had suffered under the costs of previous wars and were unhappy with their lords.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Spain's budget increasingly relied on imports from the New World, as levels of income kept decreasing on the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>23,24</sup> This shows that Spain was draining the wealth from its own country to fund external wars.

To conclude, while Spain was still the strongest power in Europe at the eve of the Thirty Years' War, its hegemonic status was brittle and Madrid was being outpaced by its peers: militarily, Spain was losing ground to France and other countries; economically, its major source of money, namely silver from the New World, was unreliable and victim to piracy and privateering, and in terms of trade they were being outcompeted by the Netherlands and England; territorially, Spain was unable to defend all their European holdings at once, showing signs of imperial overstretch.<sup>25,26</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Luc Duerloo, *Dynasty and Piety: Archduke Albert and Habsburg Political Culture in an Age of Religious Wars*(Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 137.

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Dunthorne, *Britain and the Dutch Revolt 1560-1700*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 84.

<sup>15</sup> Jan De Vries, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 689.

<sup>16</sup> See last section for the decline of Spanish economy.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 81.

<sup>18</sup> Alison D. Anderson, *On the Verge of War: International Relations and the Jülich-Kleve Succession Crisis, 1609-1614*(London: Humanities Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Their territory included the colonies in the Philippines as well as in the New World.

<sup>20</sup> Regina Grafe, Alejandra Irigoin, "A Stakeholder Empire: The Political Economy of Spanish Imperial Rule in America," *Economic History Review*65, no. 2 (2012): 632.

<sup>21</sup> Paul C. Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica, 1598-1621: The Failure of Grand Strategy* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 276.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Brightwell, "Spanish Origins of the Thirty Years' War," *European Studies Review*9 (1979): 419.

<sup>23</sup> Spanish internal economic power relied mostly on its large population.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *Europe in Crisis, 1598-1648*(New York: Fontana, 1984), 212.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Roberts, "The Military Revolution, 1560-1660," *The Journal of Modern History*48, no. 2 (June, 1976): 23.

<sup>26</sup> Davies Trevor, *The Golden Century of Spain 1501-1621*(New York City: Macmillan & Co., 1961), 243-252.

### *The Thirty Years' War*

First, many intervening states were longing to expand their territories. Most Habsburg opponents could be categorized as 'dissatisfied' powers, that is, nations wanting to acquire more land.<sup>27</sup> Sweden and Denmark wanted to expand their territorial influence at German expense, Bohemia and the Palatinate wanted to expand within Germany at the expense of other German nations, and France wanted to break through the Habsburg circle surrounding their lands.<sup>28</sup> Achieving their goals would put the respective countries in conflict with the Habsburg holdings, who were too powerful to be defeated by one country. Consequentially, the Habsburg opponents vying for territorial expansion is an important reason for the local religious conflict turning into a prolonged war.<sup>29</sup>

Balance of power theory provides a second reason why the local religious conflict expanded to a pan-European one. This theory holds that nations want to secure their survival by preventing one nation from gaining enough military power to dominate all others.<sup>30</sup> Since the reign of Charles V, the Habsburgs had dominated Europe.<sup>31</sup> They wielded significant influence in Europe, due to the enormous size of their holdings.<sup>32</sup> France, the only country able to patronize Spain, was plagued with civil war, which left Spain as the uncontested power. When stability returned, French contestation of Spanish power followed suit. Therefore, as Wedgwood notes, the war must be seen against the background of a wider anti-Habsburg struggle, in which France was the front runner.<sup>33,34</sup>

Thus, apart from religious reasons, there were important political reasons for countries to wage war with the Habsburgs – a desire for territorial expansion, a desire for political independence, and a desire to restore the balance of power in Europe. As explained in the first part, the picture of the political system in Europe before the Thirty Years' War was one full of enmity and resentment towards the Habsburg family. Many historians have therefore argued that the Thirty Years' War was inevitable.<sup>35</sup> They claim that the arrangements agreed in Augsburg in 1555, among which was the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, were 'nothing more than a truce that shelved only temporarily the outbreak of open conflict', because 'neither side was sincere'.<sup>36,37</sup> War did not immediately break out after the peace conference as most major powers in Europe were exhausted from their respective prolonged wars.<sup>38</sup> Political historians generally depict Germany in the years after 1609 as on a 'knife-edge' waiting for the 'spark' that would transform 'a cold war into a hot one'.<sup>39</sup> When the Bohemian revolt started, the enemies of Spain and Austria woke up, eager to fight for their influence.

<sup>27</sup> Arie Kacowicz, "Explaining Zones of Peace: Democracies as Satisfied Powers?," *Journal of Peace Research* 32, no. 3 (1995): 265.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Howard, "A Thirty Years' War? The Two World Wars in Historical Perspective: The Prothero Lecture," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 3, (1993): 179.

<sup>29</sup> Franz Szabo, "Prince Kaunitz and the Balance of Power," *The International History Review* 1, no. 3 (1979): 401.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Kegley, *World Politics: Trends and Transformation* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2005), 503.

<sup>31</sup> Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (Sydney: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 35.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>33</sup> The first conflict was over the dominance in Italy, fought in 1494, in which the French lost. A second conflict was the French assistance of the Dutch in 1568 and the English between 1568-1604.

<sup>34</sup> Cicely Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (New York City: New York Review of Books, 2005), 39.

<sup>35</sup> Brightwell, "The Spanish Origins of the Thirty Years' War," *European Studies Review* 9, (1979): 423.

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *Thirty Years' War* (Abingdon: Routledge Publishers, 1997), 145.

<sup>37</sup> John Cooper, *The New Cambridge Modern History, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 396.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Wilson, "The Causes of the Thirty Years' War," *English Historical Review* 73, no. 502 (2008): 558.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Englund, *Die Verwüstung Deutschlands. Einge Geschichte des Dreißigjährigen Krieges* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 2013), 64.

To summarise, the underlying reasons for the war were both religious and political, with political reasons – dissatisfaction with the territorial divisions & balance of power – as most important.

### ***Reasons for the Spanish Intervention in the German Struggle Against Bohemia***

Although Spain's actual hegemony was over, it still decided to join its ally, Austria, in its struggle against Bohemia. As discussed previously, the *Pax Hispanica* was a paradoxical peace, with Spain failing militarily, economically and territorially. The realization of its waning power stimulated the idea of closer cooperation with the German Habsburgs.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, Spain's hunger to increase its influence and lands throughout Europe brought it in close contact with the German princes.<sup>41</sup>

For a long time, Bohemia had been at the centre of Spanish ambitions within the German empire. Even after the Imperial capital had moved from Prague to Vienna, the territory retained its importance, as the King of Bohemia could cast a vote in the election for the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>42, 43</sup> Before the Thirty Years' War, both crowns were securely in the hands of Habsburg members. However, the childless Habsburg emperor made this position insecure. If the nobles were to elect the wrong person (i.e. anti-Habsburg) as King of Bohemia and consequentially to the Empire's crown, then the effect upon Spain would be severe: it could lose its holding in Italy, Tyrol and the Rhineland, as these were formally under the control of the Holy Roman Emperor.<sup>44</sup> Losing the territories would prove devastating to Spanish influence, as they would be confined geographically to the Iberian Peninsula, Southern Italy and the Spanish Netherlands. Therefore, securing the Bohemian crown became a top priority for Spain.

To achieve this goal, Spain relied on a pro-Spanish Habsburg to campaign for the crown. This plan, however, failed. Due to the aforementioned unhappiness amongst the population, the Bohemians revolted and elected Frederick V, Elector Palatine, an anti-Habsburg.<sup>45</sup> For Spain, this meant that they could choose between interfering in the election, and initiating a war, or preserving the *Pax Hispanica*.<sup>46</sup> Peace would have been the best course of action for Spain. Firstly, the crown of the Holy Roman Empire had been secured by the Habsburgs, unaware of the revolt, two days after the uprising. Secondly, a new Bohemian government meant the opening of territory into which the Spaniards could expand without angering its allies.<sup>47</sup>

The Spanish emperor, however, decided that war was needed and that it would be beneficial for Spain. He argued that a sign of waning Spanish power could cause their enemies to declare war. Furthermore, upon breaking the peace in Europe, Spain wanted to make sure that the two countries who had benefited most would be curbed.<sup>48</sup> The first country was the

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<sup>40</sup> Henry Kamen, *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492-1763*(London: HarperCollins, 2005), 253.

<sup>41</sup> Myron Gutmann, "The Origins of the Thirty Years' War," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*18, no. 4 (1988): 753.

<sup>42</sup> Gerhard Baaken, *Königtum, Burgen und Königsfreie. Königsumritt und Huldigungen in ottonisch-salischer Zeit*(Stuttgart: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1981), 23.

<sup>43</sup> John Cooper, *The New Cambridge Modern History*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 277.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>45</sup> Steve Edney, *The Defenestration of Prague*(St Albans: Criticality, 2006), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica*(London: Yale University Press, 2000), 321.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Sullivan, "The Politics of Bohemia and the Thirty Years' War on the Spanish Baroque Stage," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*87, no. 6 (2010): 743.

<sup>48</sup> Gutmann, "The Origins of the Thirty Years' War," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*18, no. 4 (1988): 764.

Netherlands. The truce allowed the Dutch to compete with Spain and Portugal in the colonies. Furthermore, they had transformed Amsterdam into the new commercial hub of Europe, supplanting Venice and London.<sup>49</sup> If this were to continue then, Philip III argued, they would soon take over Spain as a colonial power.<sup>50</sup> The second country was England. By making peace with London, Spain had allowed them to increase their naval capacity, extend their trade and set up colonies, including settlements in North America.<sup>51</sup> Spain's interference in the conflict must therefore be seen in the light of a larger religious-political cause: by attacking protestants, Philip III reckoned that the heretical English would interfere. This would provide Spain with the necessary *casus belli* to fight England.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the war with the Dutch 'rebels' was to be reinitiated, as the truce would soon expire. Fighting a protestant prince would strengthen the Spanish cause against the Netherlands, as its rebellion was similarly fuelled by a difference in religion.

To summarise, these are the three most important factors for Spanish intervention in the local religious conflict. Firstly, securing the Bohemian crown would ensure increased Spanish influence in Italy and Germany. By gaining additional lands, their hunger for new territories would be fulfilled. Secondly, Spanish interference in a local German conflict would provide the Spaniards with reasons to fight the English, while at the same time strengthening the legitimacy of their cause in the Dutch rebellion. Thirdly, after settling the Bohemian question, the regained Habsburg hegemony could take out the enemies of Spain. In one war, Philip III reckoned, Spain would increase its influence in the German and Italian states, as well as cripple England and destroy the Netherlands.

### ***The Outcome of the Thirty Years' War and its Consequences for Spain***

Four years of parley resulted in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, concluding the Thirty Years' War. Significant religious changes were institutionalized within the treaty. Firstly, all parties to the treaty had to recognize the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, which stated that every prince could determine the official religion of his state.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, Calvinism became recognized as an official religion. Finally, the treaty also stated the general sovereignty of a ruler over his state, defined by Hinsley as "the idea that there is a final and absolute political authority in the political community ... and no final and absolute authority exists elsewhere."<sup>54,55</sup> In terms of lands, several territories were transferred between the main parties to the war. For Spain, the most significant change was the definite loss of the Spanish Netherlands.<sup>56</sup> This loss signified two things: Spain had lost its military and economic might; additionally, Spain had officially stepped down as the reigning hegemon.

However, the Peace of Westphalia did not settle the conflict with the French, who would continue fighting until 1659. Seen as a part of the Thirty Years' War, the Franco-Spanish war was concluded with the Treaty of the Pyrenees. Territorially speaking, France gained

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 654.

<sup>50</sup> Brightwell, "The Spanish Origins of the Thirty Years' War," *European Studies Review*9, (1979): 421.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Bucholz., Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485-1714: A Narrative History* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2008), 144.

<sup>52</sup> Latin: 'an occasion of war'; 'an act or event that provokes or is used to justify war, n.a., *Chabers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2001), 219.

<sup>53</sup> 'Cuius regio, eius religio', Robert Barro, Rachel McCleary, *Which Countries Have State Religions?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Harry Hinsley, *Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 25-26.

<sup>55</sup> Parker, *Thirty Years' War* (Abingdon: Routledge Publishers, 1997), 17-18.

<sup>56</sup> Laura Baena, *Conflicting Words: The Peace Treaty of Munster and the Political Culture of the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Monarchy* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011), 240.

several provinces.<sup>57</sup> The two treaties highlighted important changes in the power dimensions. Firstly, the loss of the Netherlands meant that the Spaniards had to compete with additional colonial power for an indefinite amount of time. This put a damp on their capabilities to easily transform their resources into influence.<sup>58</sup> Secondly, the peace treaties made clear Spain's imperial overstretch.<sup>59</sup> The loss highlighted the fact that it was unable to defend all its territories at once. Thirdly, the Treaty of the Pyrenees was a sign that the Bourbons, the royal family of France, had ended the dominance of the Habsburgs.<sup>60</sup> While still considered a great power, if only second-tier, Spain now had to listen to France in European affairs.

Why did Spain, in the end, lose the war? Not for military reasons. Whilst Spanish tercios had become less powerful, they were still nearly invincible. Additionally, Spain's military leaders had proved very capable and rarely lost any major battles.<sup>61</sup> Their army was also one of the largest, so it was never in danger of being overwhelmed in numerical terms.<sup>62</sup>

The main reasons for Spanish failure were therefore economic ones. Previously, I stated that before the Thirty Years' War, Spain was the richest country in terms of absolute GDP, able to rely on both taxations from most of their territories and an influx of silver from their colonies in the New World. Spain, however, was not one big territory, rather it was a unity of several kingdoms with their fiscal laws, languages, and traditions. Castile was the largest and richest province of Spain and was asked to bear the biggest share in terms of monies and men.<sup>63</sup> Two reasons for this: firstly, the emperor of Spain lived in this region, and could therefore ask for money more easily; secondly, the governors of other regions were often reluctant to pay for wars that were not in the interest of their region.<sup>64</sup> Thus, as Cooper states, the "decline of Spanish hegemonic status consisted of two connected processes: the ending of Castile's predominance in Spain, and the ending of Spain's predominance in Europe."<sup>65</sup>

Several factors contributed to the decline of the region. Firstly, natural disasters such as droughts forced farmers to move to cities. The resulting overpopulation combined with the lack of sanitation and food made diseases prevalent, worsening the decline of Castile.<sup>66</sup> Dwindling population levels were further aggravated by Castilian casualties in the Spanish wars. A second factor attributable to Castilian decline is over-taxation. Due to the myriad of wars, as well as the increase in war expenditures, the Spanish treasury was regularly empty, resulting in bankruptcy every decade. To balance its expenses, Spain was forced to borrow at significantly higher rates than its peers.<sup>67</sup> To cover the interest, further monies were needed, thus an additional tax was implemented in Castile who was again forced to bear the burden mostly on their own.

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<sup>57</sup> David Maland, *Europe in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Red Globe Press, 1991), 227.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 421.

<sup>59</sup> Imperial overstretch is a theory which suggests that an empire can extend itself beyond its ability to maintain or expand its military and economic commitments, taken from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095959251>.

<sup>60</sup> John Cooper, *The New Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 260.

<sup>61</sup> John Lynch, *Spain Under the Habsburgs, Volume One: Empire and Absolutism, 1516 to 1598* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 109.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew Anderson, *War and Society in Europe of the Old Regime, 1618 – 1789* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 21.

<sup>63</sup> Hoffman, Norberg, *Fiscal Crises, Liberty, and Representative Government* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2002), 302.

<sup>64</sup> Aurelio Espinosa, "The Spanish Reformation: Institutional Reform, Taxation, and the Secularization of Ecclesiastical Properties under Charles V," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 37, no. 1 (2006): 9.

<sup>65</sup> John Cooper, *The New Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 438.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439.

<sup>67</sup> Nicola Gennaioli, Hans-Joachim Voth, "State Capacity and Military Conflict," *The Review of Economic Studies* 82, no. 4 (2015): 7.

Why could the situation in Castile not be alleviated by the influx of enormous amounts of silver from the New World? Three reasons can be found. Firstly, the colonies were able to mine less due to the depletion of the silver mines.<sup>68</sup> The lower amount of silver resulted in a lower income for Spain. Secondly, the transport of silver was prone to privateers. On one occasion, Piet Hein, a Dutch privateer, was able to capture silver and other expensive goods worth 11 500 000 guilders, enough to fund the whole Dutch army for eight months.<sup>69</sup> Such a loss proved crippling for Spain. Thirdly, even if limited amounts of silver were to arrive, only a portion could be used. Due to forced borrowing, Spain often promised silver to bankers in return for more favourable interest rates.<sup>70</sup>

To summarise, Spain lost the war mainly because it ran out of economic means, having overstretched the resources of Castile. As mentioned before, the outcome of the war was negative for Spain in three aspects: first, they lost the prosperous Dutch province and thus had to compete with another colonial power; second, the perception of imperial overstretch potentially aroused even further animosity towards Spain; third, the Habsburg family had been supplanted by the Bourbons as most powerful family, negatively affecting their prestige.

### ***Conclusion***

Was the decline of Spain then a reason or result of their intervention in the Thirty Years' War? As I have shown in this article, Spain's declining power was both a reason for its intervention in the Thirty Years' War, as well as a cause for its definitive decline thereafter. In short, Spain made a desperate gamble by entering the war. When losing this gamble, it rang the dead bell over its power status.

In support of this argument, I first looked at Spain's strength before the start of the conflict, showing that Spain was not able to sustain its uncontested hegemonic status due to three obstacles, namely France, England and the Netherlands. Secondly, I discussed the reasons behind the Thirty Years' War, which turned from a local religious conflict into a large-scale international conflict in Europe, fuelled by a widespread anti-Habsburg sentiment. Thirdly, I investigated the reasons behind Spanish intervention in the conflict. I showed that their quest for increased power forced them to interfere. Both the desire to acquire the Bohemian Crown and the belief that a religiously inspired war against the Dutch and English would allow Spain to curb the economic power of the latter, stimulated Spain to interfere. Fourthly, I discussed the outcome of the war and the Spanish defeat. The decline of the Spanish triggered an intervention by the latter in the Thirty Years' War. Spain believed that winning the war would allow them to finally become the uncontested power once again. However, the outcome of the war only helped Spain slide further down.

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Gibson, *Spain in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 102.

<sup>69</sup> Johan Warnsick, *Drie zeventiende-eeuwsche admiraals. Piet Heyn, Witte de With, Jan Evertsen* (Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen, 1938), 65.

<sup>70</sup> Cooper, *The New Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 501.