Introduction

Before his death, Ferdinand of Aragon warned his grandson, the future Charles V, not to follow the impulses of youth and embroil himself in a struggle for supremacy with France. Despite the vast inheritance that fortune had so unexpectedly bestowed upon him – the accumulated possessions of four different states – Ferdinand knew from bitter experience that France would prove more than a match for his successor. He predicted that the struggle would be long and costly, becoming an all-consuming preoccupation. It would prevent Charles from fighting against the Muslims, which was the primary task of a Christian prince, and a vital necessity for a king of Spain. If conflict did break out, Ferdinand declared that it would initiate ‘an eternal war within Christendom’.

He was not far off the mark. Four decades later, large areas of Charles’s vast empire had been devastated by the almost continual wars against France and other enemies. The financial and political structure of his states was in chaos. Charles faced widespread internal unrest; all his states faced bankruptcy, and virtually all areas under his control were threatened with invasion. Wisely, he admitted defeat, abandoned power and sought solace, and perhaps penance, in monastic retreat. He left his son Philip the unenviable – and some believed, impossible – task of saving the empire.

This book focuses on the crucial period of transition during the 1550s when the emperor experienced physical, mental and political collapse. It analyses the impact of the long years of war and the gradual decline of the monarch, tracing the emergence of Philip II and the division of the Habsburg lands. The work begins with a voyage: Philip II’s reluctant journey to Spain in 1551 just as the last major war between Charles V and the French monarch was beginning. It ends with another, similar situation, as Philip impatiently awaited a fair wind to sail back to Spain, having concluded peace with Henry II. He was no happier now than before at the prospect of returning to his homeland. Nor did his subjects greet his return with unqualified joy. By then both Aragon and Castile were gripped by rebellion.

This study seeks to revise and challenge many long-cherished misconceptions

about Charles V, Philip II and their relations with the lands they ruled. The aura of near sanctity that still clings to the figure of Charles hardly fits the ageing, inept leader, desperately holding on to power and refusing to take responsibility for his mistakes. Alternating between fits of depression and rage the emperor takes on a more human, if less heroic form. As for Philip, invariably portrayed as a timid man, awed by his father and adhering to all that was Spanish, he emerges as an aggressive leader, constantly at odds with his father and the Spanish realms.

Apart from some necessary revisionism, three broad questions have determined this analysis of the 1550s. First, the desire to examine how the vast multi-national empire of the Habsburgs functioned; why it was able to withstand the transfer of power from Charles to Philip II and Ferdinand I, and to what extent Philip’s empire differed from that of his father. The second major preoccupation is with finance. The unprecedented length of the conflicts put intolerable strains upon the empire – but how were the wars funded? What methods were used, and what were the repercussions? I was intrigued to know more about the first so-called state bankruptcy of 1557. Lastly, there was the important matter of Philip’s return to Spain in 1559 and the peace with France, long considered the most significant events of his reign. Was 1559 a turning point? The definitive settlement of the Habsburg–Valois struggle and beginning of a ‘Spanish’ monarchy? The answers to many questions were rather surprising. The transfer of power turned out to be far more complex and acrimonious than had been suspected; the exploration of finances revealed a fascinating epoch of rapidly-changing conditions – and no bankruptcy. As for the peace, it will be seen that it was soon threatened and seen as a respite rather than an end. Philip’s return to Spain was more of a victory for the Netherlands than for the Spanish realms.

Since the internal and international spheres are studied in relation to each other, and the empire is taken as a whole, the reader will find the coverage uneven, with rapid shifts from one state to another and one theme to the next. But the advantages of presenting the overall view which the rulers and their advisers had to consider, seemed to the author to outweigh the disadvantages. In between Philip’s two voyages, which were scarcely eight years apart, the world, and not just the leaders, had changed substantially. The balance of power had altered significantly; the boundaries of Europe and North Africa had been redrawn. It is curious that despite the dramatic nature of the events which fill this decade and their momentous importance, the period has attracted relatively little attention.

**PERSONALITIES**

As a prelude to the detailed analysis of the 1550s, it would be as well to be acquainted with the leading characters. In the sixteenth century the conflicts of powerful individuals were as important as the clash of the mighty realms over which they held sway. When sovereigns ruled as well as reigned, their personalities and
Introduction

aspirations are vital to an understanding of events. So too are their advisers, consorts and deputies.

Charles V (1500–58) held the highest status in Christendom; he is also the central figure in this decade.2 By 1550 he had reached the pinnacle of power. After his defeat of the German princes in 1547 and after the death of Francis I, his chief rival, it seemed as if his two major enemies had been vanquished. He spoke and behaved as if there was nothing he could not achieve if he set his mind to it. Perhaps he had come to believe his own propaganda. Immensely arrogant and grasping, Charles nevertheless appeared to epitomize chivalric notions of the warrior-king to some of his contemporaries. They were often awed by his power, though seldom by his presence. He was capable of exuding bonhomie and his vices often put him on a level most common men could relate to. His gluttony was proverbial, his dislike of paper work and preference for action both in the field and in the bedroom gave him a very human touch in younger days. But in the 1550s, the darker side of his character predominated. The political perspicacity with which his supporters at the time and since have endowed him is hard to see after 1552. Stubborn, unwilling to yield to advice that did not accord with his own preconceptions and desires, he still showed physical courage and determination not to let go of power, even if this led to greater destruction.

He had never liked making decisions – he admitted that until he was thirty he had allowed his chancellor Gattinara to take the lead. After 1551 indecision, acute depression and long periods of self-imposed isolation were his most marked characteristics. He withdrew from public life and state affairs, especially in the prolonged crisis of 1553–4. Throughout this decade, he relied very heavily, at times exclusively on his sister, Mary of Hungary. From the closing months of 1552 there were long intervals when she, not the emperor, ruled. His frustration as he was forced to make way for his son and brother introduce a note of pathos, augmented by the derision in which he was held after his retirement in the monastery of Yuste. The peace he sought often evaded him; he was prone to moments of towering rage.

2 There are hundreds of books dealing with Charles’s reign: his popularity was much helped by the fact that at least three countries claimed him as their own, namely Spain, the Netherlands and Germany. But few of the biographies are noteworthy. K. Brandi, The Emperor Charles V (English edn., London 1939, Harvester Press–Krauss reprint, 1980) is still the weightiest and most useful although seriously neglecting Spain and the southern front. More recently, M. Fernández Alvarez, Charles V (London, 1975) redressed the balance in favour of Spain. H. G. Koenigsberger has written an admirably brief introduction to the reign in ‘The empire of Charles V in Europe’, in the New Cambridge Modern History vol. 11, reprinted in his The Habsburgs and Europe, 1516–1660 (London, 1971), pp. 1–62. But the best guides to Charles’s complex character and actions are his own letters and memoirs. The latter survive in a Portuguese copy and were published in a bilingual text by A. Morel-Fatio (ed.) Historiographie de Charles-Quint., 1re partie, suivi des mémoires de Charles-Quint (Paris, 1913). A Spanish version is available in the excellent collection of the emperor’s letters edited by M. Fernández Alvarez, Corpus documental de Carlos V (5 vols., Salamanca, 1971–81). These should be complemented by the letters published by K. Lanz, Correspondenz des Kaisers Karl V (3 vols., Leipzig, 1846). Most accounts of Charles’s life, however, pass from his victory over the German princes in 1547 to his retirement with scarcely a pause.
Plate 1  Charles V
Introduction

But the anger that caused abject fear and the fall of powerful men was now no more than the tantrums of an irascible old man. By contrast, Mary of Hungary (1505–58) retained her full faculties to the end and her indomitable will was scarcely diminished by her retirement. This strong, indeed overpowering woman was also noted for her proud bearing and manly deportment. Widowed soon after her marriage to the unfortunate Lewis II of Hungary, she experienced a period of political and personal neglect which undoubtedly influenced her subsequent enjoyment of and determination to wield power. Aged only twenty-six when her brother summoned her to take over the government of the Netherlands during his absence from the area, she established her regime rapidly and soon commanded a mixture of respect and fear. Her decisiveness and her capacity for political control made her an invaluable partner for Charles. She believed in strong government and found it difficult to tolerate interference or resistance either from the area she governed or from her brother and nephew, whom she was bound to serve. She was without a doubt a most difficult person to handle, and a dangerous foe.

Whereas a painter might be tempted to use bold brushstrokes to portray Mary of Hungary, he might consider a fine pencil more suitable to depict Juana (1535–73), the youngest of Charles’s surviving children. Her features were rather delicate and her beauty widely acknowledged. But the two women had a great deal in common. More than once Juana was described as ‘masculine’ by her contemporaries; a tribute to her strength of character and capacity to govern. Her decisiveness was evident in childhood. By the age of nineteen she was both a widow and a mother: her husband João died as a result of a riding accident some days before the birth of their son Sebastian in January 1554. A few months later she would assume the government of the Spanish realms. The fact that she was a woman, as much as her youth and complete lack of political experience, led most observers to assume that she would be a mere figure-head, subservient to her advisers and male relatives. They had not reckoned on her intelligence, vigour and pride. From the start she attended meetings of the major councils regularly, and once she had become familiar with her post and the problems of the realms, she took a leading part in discussions and decisions. Her ability to influence and even control the councils was amply proved during 1558 when she led the challenge to her brother’s policies and refused to accept the new style of government he had devised in an attempt to strengthen his power and curb hers.

3 J. de Jongh, Mary of Hungary. Second regent of the Netherlands (London, 1958) although this is a rather romanticised view of Mary, parts of which are questionable, the biography brings out well her powerful character and the influence she had over Charles. The regency is covered in pp. 139–272. E. Albéri, Le relazioni degli ambasciatori Veneti al Senato durante il secolo decimocento (15 vols., Florence, 1839–63), ser. 1, vol. 3, pp. 208–9 for a brief description of her.
5 The conflict with Philip will be amply explored in chapters 7 and 8.
Plate 2 Mary of Hungary
Introduction

The strength and personality of some of these Habsburg women often make their male kinsmen pale by comparison. Philip II (1527–98) is a monarch frequently accused of being great by circumstance and utterly undistinguished in character. Bigotry and suspicion are the most frequently cited characteristics.⁶ This stark picture is inaccurate. In his youth Philip had been reserved and even cold towards friend and foe alike. He carefully cultivated an image that was highly prized in the Spanish court – Juana and their uncle Ferdinand did likewise, and were all much admired for their almost unnatural capacity for restraint. The control of emotion, particularly in public, and the ability to take reverses with stoic calmness were the salient features of what was termed sosiego. Yet all were capable of establishing very deep, even passionate, emotional bonds with spouses, children and friends. Restraint should not be mistaken for absence of feeling. Outside Spain, these mannerisms were considered alien and distasteful, and were usually interpreted as a mixture of haughtiness, aloofness and lack of courtesy. During Philip’s long visit to the Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire 1548–50, he was made acutely conscious that his reserve and control had created an unfavourable impression. His eagerness to establish himself and gain power prompted him to change, as did the political and personal maturity he gained during his spell as regent of the Spanish realms from 1551–4.

When he next emerged on the international stage he was unanimously acclaimed as a man of exquisite tact and graciousness. Whilst he retained an obsessive concern with honour and was intensely proud, he learnt to set aside his pride when political expediency demanded. In 1557 the Venetian ambassador was extolling the need for peace in Italy and told Philip that he ‘was one of the greatest, or rather the greatest’ prince. Philip ‘interrupting me said, “I am no greater than the others, nor will I be so, but choose to acknowledge all the Italian potentates as friends”’.⁷ In other words, Philip had learnt the art of diplomacy. Yet behind the newly expressed affability lay a man who was extremely ambitious, aggressive, and driven by inexorable willpower to achieve his goals, whatever the cost to his realms.

It is commonly thought that Philip was both indecisive and overawed by his father. Neither claim will stand up to detailed examination. He soon revealed his penchant for requesting as many opinions as possible on important issues, and liked

⁶ As in the case of Charles, accounts of Philip’s life during these years are sketchy and inadequate. Many historians behave as if the reign did not really begin until 1559. The two most recent biographies in English are no exception although very valuable in other ways. P. Pierson, Philip II of Spain (London, 1975) is a straightforward account, whilst G. Parker, Philip II (London, 1979) gives a far more personal portrait. F. Braudel, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II (2nd edn., 2 vols, Paris, 1966; English trans., London, 1972) contains much information about other areas too. L. Cabrera de Córdoba, Felipe II is still invaluable for many details. H. G. Koenigsberger has written a useful introduction to the king’s government in ‘The statecraft of Philip II, European Studies Review, 1 (1971), pp. 1–21. Other works will be cited in the text and included in the bibliography.

⁷ CSP. V, vol. 6 (111), p. 1146.
Plate 3 Princess Juana
Introduction

to weigh up the advice of his leading counsellors for as long as he could, but this is not to say that he lacked the capacity to make decisions or impose his will, however unpopular it might be. Philip followed the precepts of good kingship because he felt it was his duty to do so. He was conscientious, hard-working, of average intelligence and wide-ranging interests. He had his passions too – he loved hunting, tournaments, music, collecting books and fine art. But his pleasures were moderate; prudence and restraint as well as a love of order pervaded his life, and these elements lack the colourfulness of excess.

As for his relations with Charles, there was a great deal of conflict between them. Philip repeatedly opposed his father's internal and international policies. At times, they were involved in acrimonious disputes, and there was little contact between them after 1556, although they began to draw closer together in the last year of the emperor's life, when he alone seemed to sympathise with Philip's determination to win the war with France despite the appalling toll of lives and resources. Both men were acutely conscious of the need to present a united front, so they kept their quarrels out of the public eye; consequently, contemporaries failed to appreciate Philip's growing influence and until 1557 many foreign observers considered Philip a weak, timid and ineffectual prince, under the control of his well-known father. However, it was only in 1559, as he wrestled with seemingly impossible problems that the more familiar traits of Philip's character emerge – his caution increased, and it is possible to trace the beginning of the anxious, providentialist ruler who dominated Europe thereafter.

Next in status is Ferdinand (1503–64), ruler of the Habsburg lands in central Europe, king of the Romans from 1531.² Ferdinand always lived in the shadow of his more powerful and aggressive older brother. For most of his life he acted as Charles's deputy in the Holy Roman Empire, partly out of necessity since his own resources were insufficient to deal with the many internal and external threats to his lands, especially the advance of the Ottoman Turks. But also because he was of a gentle and quiet disposition, prone to being bullied and cajoled by Charles and Mary. At times he appears timid; he was always reserved and gracious. Like Philip, he was moderate in everything, and this proved an invaluable asset in an empire torn by confessional and political strife. He knew how to compromise and was a skilled negotiator. Always happiest when he was with his family, he was determined to advance his numerous children and obtain a just partition of the Trastámara and Habsburg inheritances denied by Charles (pp. 34–5, 110). This was one trait that Charles seriously underestimated.

His eldest son, Maximilian of Austria (1527–76), was entirely different.³ He was a man of violent passions and temperament. Shrewd, calculating and headstrong, he

Plate 4 Philip II