

## The Story

# Chapter 6: The Fall of the Spanish Empire

In 1556, at the age of 29, Philip II became the ruler of Spain, overseeing a realm that stretched from Europe to the Philippines, an empire on which the sun literally never set.

Compared to his father, Charles V, Philip was far more concerned with converting the peoples of the New World to Catholicism and treating them humanely. But when it came to Europe, Philip's faith made him even more intolerant of heretics than Charles. After Dutch Protestants rebelled against his rule in the Netherlands, Philip launched a protracted and sometimes vicious campaign to suppress the revolt. At the same time, his forces in the Mediterranean engaged in one of the bloodiest naval battles in history against the Ottoman Empire. Although these conflicts ended in stalemates, they were so expensive that, again and again, Philip was forced to declare the Spanish crown bankrupt. Only the prospect of more treasure arriving from the New World made bankers willing to continue lending to Philip.

*...One can't forget that that religious faith was what justified the power of these monarchies. In 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, the monarchies were called "Monarchies of Divine Right." Political power was religious power.*

— Juan Hernández, Spanish architectural historian

### **The Richest Mountain in the World**

In 1545, after silver was discovered in the Andes Mountains in what is today Bolivia, it was immediately clear that this enormously rich strike had the potential to lift the Spanish Empire out of debt. But there was one problem: the silver mine and the town of Potosí that grew up around it are located at 13,000 feet, making Potosí the highest city in the world. It is a bitterly cold and forbidding place. Spaniards refused to work in the mine, and African slaves found it intolerable and constantly revolted and escaped into the surrounding mountains. Unless forced, the indigenous population generally refused to work for the Spanish, and Spain's "New Laws" expressly forbid enslaving them. But since they were the only feasible source of workers for mine, Philip II decided to put the native people to work by extracting a form of labor tribute from local chieftains. For the next 300 years, virtually all of the indigenous men in the region would be forced to take turns working in deadly conditions in the mine.

*The historical records reveal that millions may have died while working in the mine. A metaphorical way of thinking about it is that so much silver was mined here that you could build a bridge of silver from Potosi to*

*Spain. And with the skeletons of all the men who died here, you could build a bridge of skeletons back from Spain.*

– Soledad Fortun, expert on Potosi history

Between 1545 and 1600, a barren hillside was transformed into a mining town of 150,000, making Potosi the largest city in the New World and more than twice as large as London. And the mountain, Cerro Rico, turned out to be, as one geologist noted, “the richest mountain in the history of the world.” The mine eventually produced 35,000 tons of silver, more than existed in all of the countries of Europe put together.

### **A Stunning Defeat**

In Philip’s eyes, the best use he could make of the vast mountain of silver God had given him was to end the Dutch rebellion. To win the war in the Netherlands, he knew he had to depose England’s Protestant queen, Elizabeth I, and cut off the support the English were giving the Dutch rebels. So he began to plan an invasion of England and one of the most ambitious naval campaigns in history.

The Spanish Armada’s infamous attack against England in 1588 turned out to be one of the biggest upsets in military history. Between the fighting and the storm-driven destruction, some seventy Spanish ships were sunk and 15,000 of Philip’s men died.

An era was drawing to a close—one in which the kings of Spain believed that they had been chosen by God to rule the world. With the Armada’s defeat, Spain would soon relinquish its role as the world’s only superpower.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

### The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire

Directions: Read the passage and answer the following questions.

1. How far did the Spanish empire stretch?
2. What was Philip's biggest concern?
3. How did Philip II respond to the rebellion in the Netherlands?
4. Why did Philip II have to declare the Spanish crown bankrupt?
5. What was hopefully going to pull the Spanish empire out of debt?
6. What were some of the issues in Potosi?
7. How did Philip II respond to the Native's refusal to work?
8. How many tons of silver was eventually produced?
9. Which nation was supporting the rebellion in the Netherlands? Who was the ruler?
10. How did Philip the II respond to this?
11. What was the result of this attempted invasion?