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Spain Past and Present

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Reflecting on the Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire

Throughout history, Spain has created a rich and fascinating story with a plethora of internal and external influences. Between religious conflicts, explorations that led to significant discoveries, and the creation of new nations, Spain had a hand in all of it.

The end of the Spanish Reconquista. The Spanish Reconquista was a multi-century-long conquest by the Spanish Christians to slowly reclaim the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims. The signifying day for the end of this conquest came in 1492, when the Spanish captured the region of Granada, the last region on the very tip of the south, from the Muslims. Christianity then became the official religion of Europe. Additionally, 1492 was an impactful year for Spain as they also expelled the Jews and discovered the Caribbean. During this time, Europeans were looking for ways to explore new regions to acquire materials needed from the Asian world. The Spanish took the northern route and discovered new territories in the Caribbean to the west, while the Portuguese took the southern route around Africa. To restrict conflict between the two countries' efforts of exploration, the Treaty of Alcacovas-Toledo was created. This treaty created a line that restricted Spain from exploring the South, and restricted Portugal from exploring the North. Thus, the famous explorer, Christopher Columbus. Under the current Castillian rule, Columbus was partially funded by the Castillian government and partially privately funded to explore the West. In agreement with the Castillian Queen, in

any land that Columbus discovered, he would be the administrator under the Castillian name. Once he reached this land, another treaty was signed, the Treaty of Tordesillas, that restricted Portugal from moving any further west and Spain from moving any further East.

Moving into the 16th century, a new leadership arose. The Habsburgs entered into the leadership of Spain, and Charles I inherited the Spanish kingdoms from his grandparents. Charles was the grandson of Catholic monarchs which granted him rule of Kingdom of Aragon, Castile, Navarre, and the American territories; he was also the grandson of European monarchs which also granted him rule of Austria, the Holy Roman Empire, the Lowlands, Luxembourg, and Franc Condé. Charles I was a very powerful man and ruled over the majority of the European regions. Following his inheritance, Martin Luther wrote the 95 Theses opposing the Christian religion. This caused a questioning of not only Christianity but the monarch as well within the regions in which Charles ruled, as politics and religion were interconnected. This split Charles' following into two groups, the Catholics who followed the word of the Pope, and the Protestants who believed in Christ but were not followers of the Pope. In turn, this caused a permanent war with the Dutch, as the Dutch began to form Protestant beliefs and wanted to be separated from the Catholic Spain. There also arose conflicts with the French, the Ottomans, and the Muslim Turks. This widespread conflict split the Habsburgs' rule into two parts: the Spanish Habsburgs ruled the Iberian Peninsula and the Netherlands, while the German Habsburgs ruled the Holy Roman Empire. Charles II was born as a result of inbreeding within the Habsburg family, following the agreement

of marriage within families. The first rule of the Habsburgs ended with the death of Charles II in 1700.

Following the death of Charles II, there was no clear successor to the Spanish throne. Thus began the War of Succession. There were two potential heirs to the Spanish throne, Phillip V, the French king, and Charles, the Austrian Habsburg. The main conflict between these two factions was their beliefs on centralized control. France was in favor of merging the Spanish territories to be ruled by France under French laws and to be governed solely by France. The Habsburgs were willing to let the territories keep their traditions and laws without merging the territories. At this time, Britain wanted to get their hands dirty in European politics to create a perception of its strength. They chose to support France's candidate as they were afraid of a French-Spanish alliance. There were stipulations to this agreement; Phillip V was allowed to rule Spain but not France, ultimately halting the possibility of a strong French-Spanish alliance. With this, Britain also wanted a piece of the Mediterranean, as it felt detached from trade and culture. After the War of Succession had finally ended, Spain ceded Gibraltar and Minorca to Britain, as well as other territories outside of the Iberian Peninsula to Austria and Savoy. With the Borbons now in power, an "absolute monarchy" was established, in which the monarchy was immune to laws and restrictions. New borders were established to create a centralized government. Aragon's borders were abolished, and Castilian rule was imposed throughout the entire country. This created a conflict between the Castilian and Aragonian governments, as Aragon had stricter rules for its kingdom. Additionally, the Castilians felt that Navarre and the Basque Country held a

certain privilege and kept their borders intact. This war took a toll and Spain and shifted the distribution of power for years to come.

In terms of modern politics and global dynamics, the careful tiptoe around alliances and maintaining relationships is tricky. The main issue within the country was not only trying to navigate the monarchy, but also trying to maintain alliances with France, Britain, and Portugal, their close neighbors. Throughout time, Spain has shown resilience and strength on the surface level, but internally, there were issues that most people aren't aware of. Much of modern politics revolves around perception and alliances that hold peace within the world together. If a country doesn't look strong on the outside, its weakness may be exploited, like Napoleon did to the Spanish in the mid-19th century. The main difference now is that weakness is much easier to spot. The rise of digital news allows for global knowledge of the internal struggles or strengths of a country at any given time, which could pose positive and negative outcomes.

Additionally, the strong division of beliefs is a common struggle for any country. Opposing political ideologies have divided countries for centuries, some of which have led to intense civil or even global wars. In the United States, political ideologies have the power to create an extreme social divide, but have been somewhat tame in terms of physical war.

In conclusion, the Spanish Empire went through a series of ups and downs. Religion was the first of many struggles. Leadership of the country became the most prominent issue, as the people were in disagreement over which country or even which family held the power. The policies of the "absolute monarchy" were detrimental to the agreement of the new leadership. The kingdoms did not want to abide by the rules of

the new leadership, which caused conflict within the kingdoms, specifically, Aragon. The Aragonians had lived by their own rules and traditions and opposed the new French laws. With that, this was one of the first examples of how power was distributed with no consideration of the people living in Spain. Now, the people of Spain have gained representation through constitutional rights brought forth in the 19th century. The empire was not a time of the people, but rather a time of shifting in power and confusion from the kingdoms over who truly held the keys to the castle.