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1. AN INVINCIBLE ARMADA?

1588: A CLASH OF TITANS

The Atlantic Ocean. The sixteenth century AD. During much of the reign of England's Elizabeth I (1533-1603), English interlopers did not cease to raid the coasts and the ports of Spain and its towns of America and attack the Spanish vessels on their sea routes from the Indies. The English queen was also openly supporting the Dutch rebels against the fierce Spanish administration in the Netherlands. She was also behind the candidacy of Dom António de Aviz, Prior of Crato (1531-95), the pretender to the Portuguese throne, against Philip II (1527-98), the omnipotent Hapsburg King of Spain who was after the desirable crown of Portugal and all its overseas colonies. To add fuel to the fire, Queen Elizabeth had also tried to make military alliances with the Fez-Moroccans and the Ottomans to go against Spain, their common enemy. After a decade-long tit-for-tat of English piracy and Spanish sanctions, Philip II was brought to the end of his tether when he learnt of the decapitation of Mary Queen of Scots (1542-87) under the English axe and finally made up his cautious mind to send a naval colossus of never-before-heard-of proportions to depose this troublesome Queen of England, to place himself or one of his relatives on the English throne, and to allow the English Catholics their right to exist and practise their religion in their own country.

Morgan (2006) explains the historical context in Europe in the late 16th century and insists on the significance of France's political weakness during this period, as well as on the importance of the successful revolts against Spain of the Dutch royal opponents and Protestant reformers, followed by the assassination of their leader William of Orange,¹ and by

¹ William Prince of Orange (1533-84) was the leader of the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Hapsburgs for the independence of the Netherlands.

the Duke of Alva's assertive reaction to the local rebellious population.² Spain's reconquest of the Low Countries was finally undertaken by the new governor, the efficient Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma (1545-92), the Italian nephew of Philip II. These Spanish successes were counterattacked soon after by the Dutch formal request of help from England. The weakening of France due to the War of the Three Henrys (1587-89) and the execution of the Catholic Queen Mary gave Philip of Spain free rein to believe in the possibility of becoming the ruler of re-united Catholic Europe (Wernham 1980: 74).

The so called Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604) began "officially" after the corsair Sir Francis Drake (1540-96)³ left Portsmouth in 1585 with twenty-five ships for a privateering expedition in the Spanish Caribbean with Elizabeth I's blessing. The English sovereign had also signed the Treaty of Nonsuch in 1585, which included giving the Dutch loans and sending an expeditionary force of seven thousand men (the Leicester Expedition) in 1585-86 under the command of her beloved Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (1532-88), to support the Dutch rebels against the Spanish domination in the Netherlands. The Spanish-run Low Countries (especially after the death of William of Orange and the capture of Antwerp) were perceived by Elizabeth to be too near for England's comfort. Philip then seized all English ships in Spain. From 1587 onwards, all the naval and commercial records in England include references to piracy and prizes (Wernham 1980: 371-72).

² 3rd Duke of Alva, or Gran Duque de Alba, Fernando Álvarez de Toledo y Pimentel (1507-73), governor of the Netherlands from 1567 to 1573.

³ Corsairs were patriotic naval fighters who did their most to damage their enemies' properties and obtain as many riches as possible from them in wartime with the permission and encouragement of their monarchs, this permission being called "letter of marque" in English and "patente de corso" in Spanish (hence the terms *corsair* and *corsario*). On the other hand, pirates were those who obtained bounties from other ships through coercive or violent means in times of peace. Drake and other English mariners preyed on Spanish ships and territories as pirates before 1585. Only when Spain and England went to war (Anglo-Spanish War, 1585-1604) could they technically be considered corsairs and not pirates. Velázquez (2023) also explains the different concepts of "pirate" and "corsair", both being terms related to maritime predation that was not legally defined until the proclamations of the Treaty of London (1604) and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). She bases her analysis of these concepts on the visual and narrative representations of Drake.

By 1586-87 pre-Armada England had become a real pressure cooker of religious and political clashes between English Catholics and English Protestants. Queen Elizabeth and the English administration had compromised firmly with the Protestant cause. The English were aware that their country might soon find itself in a struggle of survival and their main worry was that they saw themselves ill-equipped to fight against the high military power of Spain, the main supporter of Catholicism in the western world (Sculthorp 1998: 27). There was a real anti-Papist psychosis in England. The preacher George Gifford's (c.1547-1600) work *A Discourse of the Subtill Practises of Devilles by VVitches and Sorceres* (1587) was set on teaching English Protestants how to discover and unmask Catholic spies and potential assassins, always depicted as witches and Satan's servants (1587: 2-3). The captain of the English army in the Low Countries and playwright Barnabe Rich (c.1540-1617) published *A Path-Vvay to Military Practise Containinge Offices, Lawes, Disciplines And Orders to Be Obserued in an Army, with Sundry Stratagems Very Beneficall For Young Gentlemen, or Any Other That Is Desirous to Haue Knowledge in Martiall Exercises* (1587) with the purpose of teaching English folk the art of soldiery (1587: 16). Rich was sorry to see serious flaws in the English army of the time (42). He believed that the first step to convince the English folk of their warlike abilities in the face of any alien enemies of England was to praise every single English military move and victory, no matter how small it might have been, especially if achieved against the Spanish forces, considered to be at the time as the most powerful and best trained in the world. The English astronomer, scientist and ex-soldier in the Low Countries Thomas Digges (d. 1595), presumably following the Earl of Leicester's dictates, wrote *A Briefe Report of the Militarie Seruices Done in the Low Countries* (1587), a highly propagandistic account of Leicester as the leader of the anti-Spanish campaign of the English forces in the Protestant Netherlands, but also a thorough chant to the virtues of the English soldiers against the Spanish rule at a time when England's army and population in general needed an injection of pride and self-confidence in their own military potential. Before 1588 the English were profoundly scared of the possibility that any wild and powerful foreign despot may have wished to contemplate their feeble land as easy prey. Christopher Marlowe's plays *Tamburlaine the Great Parts I and II* (c.1587) present the cruel and eager oriental emperor as a

dreaded “fiery thirstier after sovereignty” (I, I, 20), just like Spain’s brutal Philip II was often perceived at the time by the English.

In 1587 Queen Elizabeth I assassinated her cousin Mary Stuart, the Catholic Queen of Scots, under the (largely false or exaggerated) accusations of having been behind various Spanish plots set either to dethrone England’s “Good Queen Bess” or for assassinating her, or both.⁴ Elizabeth’s final decision to carry out regicide on her own kin is attributed to the influence of the all-powerful William Cecil, Lord Burghley (1520-98), her chief advisor and Secretary of State. Due to his staunch anti-Catholicism, Burghley, whom the English queen trusted completely, lied to her about some (fictional) reports that had reached him informing that the Armada had already landed in Wales (Guy 2010: 310).⁵ Elizabeth was stricken with panic and signed her cousin’s death warrant straight away. The beheading of the misjudged Scottish queen was carried out immediately (11). As soon as Philip II heard of the assassination of the Scottish queen, he broke into tears (Kamen 1998: 290). He finally gave the go-ahead to the fleet’s commander, Don Alonso de Guzmán y Sotomayor (1550-1615), 7th Duke of Medina Sidonia, to head for England with the “Grande and Felicissima Armada”. Medina Sidonia had been granted the command of the Armada after Don Álvaro de Bazán’s unexpected death in February 1588 (Pearson 1989). According to Kamen (1998: 271-73), Philip II was at the time an ailing king, suffering badly from gout.

Britain’s Anglo-centric perception of the history of the Spanish Armada has encouraged the belief that Philip II was desperate to add England to his already extensive Hapsburg dominions in an undisguised attempt to construct a Universal Monarchy. However, the Spanish king may have arguably been more interested in ensuring the exploitation of the whole of the American and European continents than to risk an army of such huge proportions for England, a mere peripheral island in the north Atlantic. The Gran Armada’s objectives, as stated by Philip II, were to cut off any

⁴ Mainly the Ridolfi Plot (1571), the Throckmorton Plot (1583) and the Babington Plot (1586). Both Fraser (1970) and Cunningham (2002) are of the opinion that the Scottish monarch was either innocent, or very superficially involved, or even entrapped by Wasingham’s English intelligence service.

⁵ Guy’s chapter, in Morgan’s *The Oxford History of Britain*, originally published in 1984, was reedited and updated in 1988, 1993, 1999, 2001 and 2010.

military collaboration of Elizabeth I's with the Dutch rebels in the Spanish province of Flanders, as well as to put an end to all of England's pirating and privateering activities against Spanish interests. And once conquered, England would have a Catholic monarch.

Spain and England had been allies during the reigns of the first Tudors. Henry VII had married his two sons, first Arthur and then Henry (the future Henry VIII), to a Spanish princess, Catherine of Aragon. Prince Philip of Spain (later Philip II) had been King Consort of England and Ireland between 1554 and 1558 during his wife Queen Mary I's reign. Philip therefore knew England well. He did not have a high opinion of the English population, especially of the aristocracy, who used to treat the Spanish train of courtesans who accompanied their ruler in London with overt discourtesy and animosity. Thirty years later England was to become extremely bothersome to the now old but still all-powerful Spanish king.

In July 1588 the Gran Armada, the legendary and dreaded victor in Lepanto against the Turk (1571) and in another hundred-odd sea battles, was ready to be sent against Elizabeth I, arousing many optimistic expectations in Spain and in Catholic Europe, and endless apprehension in England.⁶ Traditional Spanish history has taught Spaniards that the Spanish fleet in the so called "Jornada de Inglaterra" or "Empresa de Inglaterra" was an unfortunate victim of an accumulation of ill-fated circumstances. As seen from the Spanish stand of 1588, Philip II had failed in his endeavour to teach a lesson to England, "el pirata mayor del Occidente",⁷ to Drake,

⁶ Evidence of the English apprehension for what they feared was soon coming to their coasts are the following two anonymous pamphlets, published just before the arrival of the Armada in England: *True Report of the General Embarment of All the English Shippes, Under the Dominion of the Kinge of Spaine, and of the Daungerous Adventure, and Wonderful Deliverance of a Ship of London, Called the Viol, Being of the Burthen of 130 Tunne, and The Speciall Providence of God, from the Violence of Spanyardes, at a Port Called Sebastian in Barbary; Which Adventure Was Enterprised the 25 of May 1585, and Was Finished the 29 of The Same Moneth, without Hurt to Men or Ship* (1585) and *A True Discourse of the Armie Which the King of Spaine Caused to Bee Assembled in the Hauen of Lisbon in the Yeaere 1588, against England* (1588).

⁷ As described by Cervantes in line 27 of his poem "Canción nacida de las varias nuevas que han venido de la católica armada que fue sobre Inglaterra", https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/poesias-sueltas--1/html/ff32a2de-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_3.html; accessed 3/2/2023.

the country's best-known privateer,⁸ and to the excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I, the self-proclaimed "Virgin Queen", the champion of England's Protestantism.

English historiography and English literature have consistently played their part in the construction of the English "victory" against the Spanish Armada. English ideologists have done their best to amplify the Spanish "defeat" until almost converting the episode into an English victory of mythical proportions against a bullying Catholic Spain, becoming finally a four-century propagandistic operation that has had almost no parallel in the history of humankind.

THE SPANISH ARMADA VS. THE BRITISH PROPAGANDISTIC ARMADA

Only during the last few decades of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has the British cultural establishment, albeit reluctantly, begun to come to terms with the admittance that the English "victory" over the Spanish Armada in 1588 was in fact a masterpiece manoeuvre of political propaganda. Most English-speaking historians today have already accepted that the Armada was not Spain's defeat, but rather a frustrated Spanish attack due mainly to bad luck and bad tactics and bad weather rather than to English merit. The process of accepting this conclusion instead of clinging to the perfectly and thoroughly ingrained belief that the Spanish venture was an apocalyptic fiasco has been painful and slow.

However, the popular conception of the 1588 event is still mostly seen and narrated as a Spanish "defeat" and an English "victory". Throughout the month of February 2020 the BBC gallantly broadcast a television documentary series in three episodes called *Royal History's Biggest Fibs*. The "destruction" of the Spanish Armada was the second chapter of the series.⁹

⁸ According to Morgan (2006), Drake's circumnavigation (1577-80) had been "no voyage of exploration but a belligerent act of long-distance piracy!"

⁹ Series One, Episode 2. The episode "The Spanish Armada" may be watched at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000frf0> (accessed 11/4/2020), but only if you are in the UK. The dates of its TV broadcast were February 25 and 26, 2020 (BBC4), September 5, 2020 (BBC2) and July 27, 2022 (BBC4): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000frf0/royal-historys-biggest-fibs-with-lucy-worsley-series-1-2-the-spanish-armada> (ac-

Few historians would (arguably) deny today that the Armada's "defeat" has been the "biggest" fib in England's/Britain's history, a perfectly constructed "big fat lie" told repeatedly to the world and to British people for over four centuries through the existing media available at different periods of their history.¹⁰ The BBC documentary shows how the story of the Spanish Armada of 1588 has been manipulated and mythologised for centuries in England's interest.¹¹

The narration of the "defeat" of the Armada is very probably the most successful example of "fake news" in England's history, as the popular British historian and presenter Lucy Worsley (1973-) phrased it in the documentary titled "The Spanish Armada", an episode of the series "Royal History's Biggest Fibs with Lucy Worsley". This public act of honesty regarding the reality of a historical event of such relevance to the identity of the English nation seems to be the exception to the rule, for the greatest majority of other British and American popular documentaries on the Armada still retain the image of victorious England against Spain and continue to spread the same clichéd images of England-David/Spain-Goliath, the "invincible" and proud nature of the Spanish fleet, the mystification of Drake and Elizabeth as uncontested orchestrators of the country's defence, the resounding "defeat" of the Spanish and the invigorating "victory" of the English, usually accompanied by a feminine Spanish-accented English voice given to the character of Philip II, the narration of Drake's bowling game at Plymouth, the reciting of Elizabeth's patriotic speech at Tilbury

cessed 11/4/2020). Sadly, BBCiplayer only works for the UK. The documentary has nevertheless been recently uploaded on YouTube by Spaniards on their own accord (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBG7kr8wcps> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HP-Gl2N0zNwQ>; accessed 26/5/2022).

¹⁰ Gutberlet's *Die 50 größten Lügen und Legenden der Weltgeschichte* (2007), published in Spanish under the more conciliatory title of *Las 50 mentiras de la historia* (2013), includes the defeat of the Spanish Armada as one of these fifty legendary lies in the history of humankind.

¹¹ The Spanish press did not wait long to inform their readership that the BBC had finally acquiesced to give the status of "fake news" to the defeat of the Gran Armada, namely: Olaya's article "Las 'fake news' derrotaron a la Armada Invencible" (*El País*, 13/3/2020), Solar's article "Inglaterra lo admite: La Armada Invencible fue un bulo histórico" (*La Razón*, 15/3/2020) and Grau Navarro's article "La BBC descalifica la versión oficial inglesa sobre la derrota de la Armada Invencible" (*Nueva Revista*, 24/3/2020).

about the manliness/kingship of her own English queenship, the significance of the battle of Gravelines as the beginning of the end of Spanish supremacy and beginning of England's imperial road towards dominion over the seven seas.

In YouTube one may easily find a good number of documentaries on the Spanish Armada in English, none of which, we insist, *none* of which—at the time of writing this book—presents the English-Spanish engagement from an objective stand. The kind and patient history-lover may check it him/herself. Even the documentaries that have counted on the participation and collaboration of reputed experts on the subject such as Geoffrey Parker, Colin Smith, etc., or those that have been backed or filmed by prestigious broadcast corporations and publishers, have also too often fallen into sheer subjectivity and painful-to-the-truth pro-English accounts of the episode.¹²

¹² We here include the links of various samples of documentaries on the Spanish Armada in English (all of them accessed and operative on 25/4/2020) which still present the event as an undisputed victory of the English Navy and a resounding defeat of the Spanish fleet: “The Armada Paintings Part 1/9 - The Story of the Armada” (<https://armada.parliament.uk/> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=245&v=AyX-Ug_IhOWo&feature=emb_logo), with the interventions of Pieter van der Merwe (expert on Maritime History and Art), Lord Hugh Thomas, and Anthony Oakshett (lead artist); “The Epic Failure of the Spanish Armada (It’s History)” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34XrdXiOQTY>); “Battle of the English Channel (1588) – England vs. Spain”, Mustbefunny (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cfkdr_iV4); “History’s Mysteries – The Spanish Armada”, History Channel Documentary, narrated by David Ackroyd, with the collaborations of Geoffrey Parker, Colin Smith and Peter Pierson (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_a5RAAb2dQ); “History of Warfare – The Spanish Armada” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26_I0wvsWOY); “Dan Snow Armada: Empire of the Seas”, BBC, Timeline – World History Documentaries, presented by Dan Snow (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIDA8cquOcU>); “The Spanish Armada – In Our Time”, BBC Radio 4, Sep. 4, 2010, BBC Radio 4, presented by Merllyn Bragg (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWXDW8nlGac&list=RDQMjFv8dqmgTcc&index=7>); “1 Armada – The Floating Fortress”, “2 Armada – The Last Crusade”, “3 Armada – The Scattering” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7goVe0Y8C0>); “Elizabeth – Heart of a King: Part 3 of 4”, British History Documentary – Timeline, presented by David Starkey (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JClqvThA1zU>), and so forth. We have excluded from the list the numerous 3-7 minute video simplifications of the “defeat of the Spanish Armada” as explained to English-speaking children, sometimes even narrated by children themselves, which one may easily find on YouTube.

Throughout the history of the world, all countries have endeavoured to organise national policies to create, share and spread their culture, propaganda, education, news and laws, which have regularly and customarily been made accessible to the public at large through their schools, universities, literature, church pulpits, and above all through their mass media. The press (both on paper and online), radio, cinema, television and literature (fiction, theatre and poetry mainly, without excluding literary journalism and academic journals), and in the most recent decades social media and the indispensable collaboration of the internet and new technologies, are now accessible to everyone. Few people would doubt today that the cinema has been (it probably still is) the most powerful transmitter of propaganda used by the powers-that-be up to now. Both Britain and the US have employed it with gusto for their specific political purposes and for the spreading of certain versions of historical events as desired.

The Spanish Armada and its historical context have formed the basis of the plots of numerous British and a few American and Australian films¹³ and documentaries. They have all contributed enormously to the diffusion of a subjective English/British story of supremacy and to the construction of national identity and also, too frequently, to the scorn of Spain and/or Catholicism. England's traditional enemies have been employed as the necessary culprits to lean on for Britain's construction of a supremacy story that has invariably led to the ideological building of the British Empire mentality that some sectors of Britain's society still aim to maintain today. The propagandistic Armada films created in Britain (and occasionally in the US too) have acted as loyal accomplices to their respective governments and political policies, to their national interests and their social and economic plans. They have certainly been most efficient disseminators of their given ideologies throughout the last hundred years.

¹³ British films include *Westward Ho!* (1919, silent; dir. Percy Nash); *Drake of England* (1935, dir. Arthur B. Woods); *Fire over England* (1937, dir. William K. Howard, based on A. E. W. Mason's novel *Fire over England*, 1936); *This England* (1941, dir. David MacDonald); *The Devil-Ship Pirates* (1964, dir. Don Sharp); *Elizabeth R* (1971, BBC TV drama serial in six episodes; various directors; the episode on the Armada is no. 5, "The Enterprise of England"); *Gloriana* (1984, dir. Derek Bailey) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007, dir. Shekhar Kapur). American films include *The Sea Hawk* (1940, dir. Michael Curtiz). There is also an Australian film: *Westward Ho!* (1988, cartoon).