Charles V

Charles V, Holy Roman emperor (1519-56) and—as Charles I—king of Spain (1516-56), dominated the politics of Europe for 40 years. Charles was born in Ghent, in present-day Belgium, on Feb. 24, 1500, the eldest son of the Habsburg Philip the Handsome (later Philip I) and Joan the Mad of Castile. From his father, who died in 1506, he inherited the Netherlands (including most of the modern Netherlands and Belgium) and Franche Comté (a French-speaking province that bordered eastern France but belonged to the Holy Roman Empire). After the death (1516) of his maternal grandfather, Ferdinand II of Aragon, Charles became ruler of the kingdoms of Spain and the Spanish dependencies in Italy—the kingdoms of Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia. The Habsburg possessions of Austria and several smaller south German lordships came to him on the death (1519) of his paternal grandfather, Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, as did hereditary claims to the crowns of Hungary and Bohemia. The latter were made good by his younger brother Ferdinand (later Emperor Ferdinand I) in 1526, after the last independent king of Hungary, Louis II, was killed by the Turks in the Battle of Mohács. Meanwhile, in 1519, Charles had been elected German king and Holy Roman emperor in succession to his grandfather Maximilian.

Ruler of the World

Not since Charlemagne in the early 9th century had any one ruler dominated so much of Europe. Moreover, Charles V's Spanish subjects were conquering vast overseas territories in Central America and South America. Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, began to refer to his sovereign as "ruler of the world." Charles and his subjects in Europe were certain that God had bestowed so much power on him because he had to defend Christendom from the attacks of the Turks of the Ottoman Empire and later from the Protestant heretics. Charles spoke of himself as "God's standard bearer," and his heraldic device bore the legend plus ultra ("always further"). For Charles's opponents the problem was less philosophical and eminently practical: What was he going to do with his power, and how could they preserve their independence? These questions, and the radically different answers given to them, dominated and largely explain the complex political history of Charles V's reign.

The 16th century was an age of increasing population, rising prices, growing cities, and expanding trade. These conditions were essential for the functioning of an empire as large as that of Charles V. He could borrow huge sums of money from the wealthy bankers and mineowners like the German house of Fugger or from the well-organized money market of Antwerp. In return, the lenders were given monopoly rights and political protection. Nevertheless, finance was the emperor's greatest practical problem. Time and again, promising military campaigns had to be broken off for lack of money. Once, in 1527, the unpaid imperial army in Italy took matters into its own hands, marched on Rome, and subjected the city to a murderous and devastating sack.
Control of Spain

In 1517, Charles went to Spain for the first time to claim his maternal inheritance. This foreigner, with his large retinue of Netherlanders, was unpopular. After he left in 1520, the cities of Castile (the central and largest kingdom of Spain) broke into rebellion (1520-21). Only after the nobles defeated the towns was Charles's rule accepted in Spain. His fight against the Muslim Turks and the German Protestants appealed to the traditions of the Spaniards.

Castile and the Spanish Indies provided an ever-growing proportion of the emperor's revenues. In return, Charles appointed more and more Castilians as generals of his armies, governors and viceroys of his provinces, and advisors in his councils. Gradually his international empire turned into a Castilian empire, supported mainly by the efforts of Castile but also run for the benefit of the Castilian ruling groups.

Germany and the Reformation

After his visit to Spain, Charles traveled to Germany to be crowned king of that country. His official coronation by the pope as Holy Roman emperor did not take place until 1530. In 1521 he presided over the diet (the representative assembly of the German princes and cities) at Worms and witnessed Martin Luther's refusal to recant his alleged errors. Charles was not persuaded by Luther, but he recognized the need for a thoroughgoing reform of the Roman Catholic church. It took him until 1545 to persuade a reluctant papacy to summon the Council of Trent. In the meantime it was necessary to deal with the Reformation in Germany. Charles's tactics there depended largely on the pressures he felt from his other obligations. When he was otherwise at peace, he tried to enforce the condemnation of the Lutheran doctrines on those German princes and cities that had adopted the Reformation. When he was at war with France or when the Turks threatened Germany—as they did after the Battle of Mohács and in 1529, when they besieged Vienna—he made considerable concessions to the Protestants. Much to the displeasure of the popes, the emperor's theologians even tried, though without success, to reach a compromise with the Lutheran theologians.

Wars with the Turks and France

The Turks attacked in the Mediterranean, as well as in Hungary. These attacks were particularly dangerous, as they were supported by the wide-ranging corsairs, or pirates of the Barbary States of North Africa, whose rulers acknowledged themselves vassals to the Turkish sultan. In 1535, Charles commanded his most successful campaign against the Barbary States, conquering Tunis; but in 1541 he failed against Algiers.

Charles's most persistent enemy, however, was France, whose Valois kings fought the emperor for the leadership of Europe in general and for the domination of Italy in particular. As early as 1522, Charles made an alliance with Henry VIII of England to attack and partition France. The plan failed, but the French never forgave Charles nor fully trusted him again. In 1525, Charles's army defeated and captured Francis I of France.
at the Battle of Pavia in Italy. But when Francis was released after a compromise peace, the so-called Italian Wars were resumed. The Spaniards finally acquired (1535) Milan and confirmed their domination of Italy, but Charles failed either to break French power or to win over Francis I by the offer of Milan to a French prince.

**Schmalkaldic War**

In 1546-47, Charles was temporarily free to turn against the German Protestant princes, who had allied against him in the Schmalkaldic League. He defeated and captured one of their leaders, John Frederick I, elector of Saxony, at the Battle of Mühlberg (1547), after which the other, Philip of Hesse, surrendered; but other German princes would not accept the religious settlement he tried to impose in the Augsburg Interim (1548). In alliance with France, they renewed the war in 1551 and forced the emperor to flee from Germany. Charles's brother, Ferdinand, eventually negotiated the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. This gave the German princes, but not their subjects, the right to choose either Catholicism or Lutheranism.

**Abdication**

In 1555-56, Charles V voluntarily abdicated in several stages. He left the Holy Roman Empire to Ferdinand and all his other dominions to his son, Philip II of Spain. Many historians have seen Charles V's reign as a failure. His contemporaries, however, did not, especially as Philip's marriage (1554) with Queen Mary I of England seemed to open up dazzling new prospects for the house of Habsburg. No one could know that Mary would die young and childless.

Charles retired to a comfortable villa built next to the monastery of San Yuste in Spain. There he lived the life he had always wished to live. He spent much time in religious devotions but was also surrounded by his fine collection of paintings by Titian and other Renaissance art and architecture. He listened to music, dismantled and assembled mechanical clocks, ate gluttonously, and, not least important, still meddled in European political affairs. Charles died on Sept. 21, 1558.