

FROM CRUSADER TO REALIST: REVISITING THE FIRST DECADES OF PHILIP II'S ENGLISH STRATEGY

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Abstract. This article aims to revisit Philip II's policy toward Elizabethan England, arguing that it was guided primarily by geopolitical pragmatism rather than a messianic Catholic crusade. Traditional historiography has represented the Spanish monarch as the quintessential defender of the faith, emphasizing his alleged zeal to reconvert England and his support for English Catholic exiles. However, recent scholarship shows that Philip's main concerns had nothing to do with the European Protestants, but were more centered on the Ottoman threat in the Mediterranean, the Dutch revolt, and the protection of Spanish colonial trade. The financial subsidies to English exiles and the support to Mary, Queen of Scots, are to be considered low-cost tools to keep Elizabeth occupied, and not unconditional commitments. Papal demands for a holy war were repeatedly deflected with diplomatic excuses, revealing a clear separation between religious rhetoric and realpolitik. The 1588 "Enterprise of England" is interpreted as the culmination of a long-term strategy aimed at neutralizing English support for the Dutch rebels and safeguarding the Spanish Atlantic commerce, rather than the sudden eruption of a purely religious venture. The study reframes Philip II as a monarch whose actions were dictated by strategic, economic, and defensive imperatives, other than religious motivations, positioning the Anglo-Spanish conflict within the broader context of early-modern statecraft.

Keywords: Philip II, England, Catholic Mission, Elizabeth I, Historiography

Introduction

Philip II has long been cast by traditional historiography as the quintessential Catholic king, antagonist to every kind of misbelief, including Elizabethan England. His "messianic" vision framed the English realm as the primary target of a holy crusade against Protestantism. Many contemporary testimonies have reinforced this portrayal, considering the Spanish king and the Duke of Alba as Queen Elizabeth's primary foreign enemies. In a report from a Venetian ambassador, signed on 21 April 1572, for instance, we can find the testimony of a detailed connection between English conspirators and their external allies, explicitly naming both the Pope

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and the Duke of Alba as “the Queen’s external enemies”. This view is mirrored and even amplified, also from the perspective of the English Catholic exiles. Both in the correspondence of William Allen, director of the English college of Douai, and in the records of the English Colleges on the continent, Philip II has been depicted as the fundamental pillar of their cause. The financial subsidies and his visits are narrated as a political legitimation and support for their operations, making these seminaries strategic outposts in Philip’s imperial campaign against Elizabeth’s Protestant hegemony. This perspective was not limited to the exiles themselves, as the English government also reports these institutions as funded both by the Spanish king and the Pope¹.

Modern scholars have reinforced this image, basing their studies on English sources to emphasize Philip’s self-identification as “defender of the Catholic faith”, and his conviction that the divine providence would compensate for Spain’s limited resources. This narrative portrays him as a ruler whose policy was completely dominated by a religious imperative to reconvert England and fight against protestants in Europe, a perspective that is further amplified in historiographic works that report a full Spanish support for exiled English Catholics, which also included aid to relevant figures such as William Allen and Robert Parsons. This perspective finds its testimonies in official diplomatic correspondence and papal reports, that repeatedly insisted on Philip’s desire to “restore the true faith” in England and his willingness to finance conspiracies, even when his generals cautioned against the viability of such ventures. Nevertheless, this long-standing view of Philip II, as an unambiguous religious antagonist, has been taken for granted in both contemporary testimonies and subsequent historiography, a perspective that warrants critical reassessment².

This article’s purpose is to remark on the historiographical shift that recent scholarship has identified in the assessment of Philip II’s policy toward Elizabethan England. While early narratives emphasized the king’s messianic ambition to restore catholicism, casting him as the archetypal Catholic adversary of the Protestant England, newer studies manage to bring a completely new perspective of his foreign policies. These are based on a broader corpus of diplomatic material that present his actions as conditioned more by a geopolitical pragmatism than by a religious zeal. They note that Philip’s principal preoccupations were related mainly to the Ottoman threat in the Mediterranean, and secondly to the Dutch revolt and the attacks of the Spanish ships from the colonies. To substantiate this re-evaluation, the article relies on both official and private correspondence involving Philip, his council, and his representatives abroad. These documents collectively demonstrate Philip’s rather little regard for the English Catholic expatriates and his stance toward Elizabeth I’s Protestant English realm.

The newer studies about the Spanish administration of relations with Elizabethan England show a far more complex reality. During the first years of Elizabeth’s reign, Philip’s policy was shaped less by a singular crusading ambition, than by a series of pragmatic calculations aimed at safeguarding his interests in the Mediterranean, the Netherlands and the Atlantic. His first intentions were to maintain the good relations between the two realms who’, in order to avoid an alliance of England with France. Meanwhile, Elizabeth and her Privy Council, actively financed

and armed the Protestant insurgency in the continent, providing money and military aid to the rebels, both in France and the Spanish Netherlands. This systematic support, not only strained the already overstretched Spanish war-effort in the Low Countries, but also slowly reinforced Philip's perception of England as a hostile rival, whose Protestant agenda directly undermined the Spanish geopolitical objectives. These early confrontations constitute the core of the diplomatic tension that framed Philip II's stance toward the Protestant English realm. While traditional historiography has tended to depict the Spanish monarch as a monolithic champion of Catholicism, who was confronting a uniformly hostile England, the primary sources from the period reveal a more nuanced picture in which political expediency, commercial rivalry and the balance of power in Europe were decisive factors in shaping Philip's policy toward Elizabethan England³.

The Northern Rebellion of 1569 serves a primary example of the dichotomy between the perception of Philip's unwavering support for the English Catholic cause, and the far more cautious pragmatic reality of his strategies. When the Catholic Earls of the North rose in revolt, there was a widespread and fervent expectation among the insurgents that Spanish military intervention was not only possible but also imminent, caused by the diplomatic clumsiness of the Spanish ambassador in London: Don Guerau de Spes. His fervent religious convictions and little diplomatic tact, led him to maintain clandestine contacts with various English nobles, including the Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Arundel. In these meetings, he dispensed grandiose and misleading assurances, implying that a Spanish invasion force was merely awaiting a final command. He fueled the conspirators' ambitions with vague promises of aid, encouraging them to believe that Philip was prepared to commit his forces to restore Catholicism in England⁴.

However, the reality was far different from that. The explicit instructions the ambassador received didn't imply any possibility of a Spanish intervention. The real architect of Spanish foreign policy was the coolly pragmatic Duke of Alba, Philip's governor in the Netherlands. Even if Philip was not pleased by Elizabeth's provocations, he was simultaneously contending with the Morisco revolt in Granada and the persistent Ottoman threat in the Mediterranean, leaving him with few resources for a hazardous support to the rebels. Even if he expressed a personal desire to send money and encouragement to the rising, he ultimately deferred the final decision to Alba, which is quite enlightening about his real main preoccupations.

Alba's response was resolute, viewing the English nobles with extreme suspicion and their plots as little more than delaying tactics. He blocked every proposal for concrete assistance, considering an open war with England to be a catastrophic mistake, given the lack of funds. Therefore, he advised Philip to dismiss the English overtures, and instructed de Spes to cease all engagement in any plan that could jeopardize his negotiations with the English government over a Spanish ship with aid for the Netherlands, that the English seized earlier that year. Despite the ambassador's rhetoric, which was long taken in consideration in the traditional narrative of the Spanish foreign policy towards England, the strategic decision-makers had no intention of intervening. The only tangible aid, represented by one Spanish agent sent with money in February 1570, arrived long after the revolt had been

suppressed, and was more symbolic than real, a crucial distinction to deeply understand Philip's policy. Ironically, the threat of Spanish intervention, born from de Spes' unauthorized diplomacy and the rebels' desperate hopes, proved to be more impactful for the English construction of a foreign enemy than any actual support. It fueled the popular imagination with rumors of a Spanish landing, while simultaneously providing Elizabeth's government with the perfect pretext to portray the uprising as a dangerous, foreign-backed conspiracy, justifying a brutal and decisive repression⁵.

Another interesting element to examine is Philip II's relationship with the English Catholic exiles on the Continent. This particular aspect of his foreign policy represents a masterclass in strategic ambiguity, where the public patronage masked a deeper pragmatic and cynical geopolitical calculus. The Spanish monarch was mostly recognized as the main defender of the Catholic faith among the exiles, and his support was concrete and highly visible, manifesting in official subsidies that were essential for the survival of the English colleges on the continent. Through Don Juan de Austria, Philip assigned an annual grant of 1600 florins to the college at Douai, and he later increased the sum to 150 gold crowns per month in 1580, and again to 2000 gold crowns a year in 1582. This financial stream, however, was not intended to underwrite a sustained military campaign, but it functioned primarily as a symbolic guarantee of protection for English clerics in exile, reinforcing Spain's image as protector of the Catholics, while allowing the monarchy to keep the exiles politically occupied rather than operationally effective. Furthermore, the Spanish crown actively sponsored the foundation of new seminaries in its own domains, both in Valladolid (1589) and Seville (1592), providing a safe space for priests fleeing Elizabethan persecution. This consistent financial and political backing, was interpreted by contemporaries and by the traditional historiography, as an irrefutable proof of Philip's unconditional commitment in restoring Catholicism in England⁶.

However, this public posture of unwavering commitment, disguised a profound skepticism within his inner circle, caused by a severe assessment of geopolitical priorities. There was a strong perception of unreliability of the English Catholic themselves, especially by the Duke of Alba, who expressed a visceral distrust of the English character in his private correspondence with the king, dated 27 August 1571. He viewed the exiles not as steadfast allies but as inherently volatile and self interested people, and wrote to the king:

“Firstly, they are a vain nation, passionate and rash when in need, and when they see themselves without it, arrogant enemies of all nations they see in their homeland”⁷.

That is not to be considered a mere prejudice, but a lucid strategic evaluation: Alba believed it hostile to build a long-term policy on allies he considered opportunistic and fundamentally untrustworthy. The Duke had strong consideration about the possible destiny of the Catholic religion in England, and excused his reluctance in intervening directly or by financing plots, considering that in case of failure, “the Catholic religion would be completely lost in England”⁸. To him, it was not only a political and military risk, but it could also jeopardize the whole catholic

and spiritual aim. Philip himself repeatedly stressed, in his private missives, about not having the possibility to start a full-scale invasion of England, thereby signaling to his commanders that any assistance to the exiles should remain limited, conditional, and strictly financial.

From this perspective, Philip's support for the exiles was not an end in itself, but a calculated strategic tool. The primary purpose of the money was far more psychological than material, and it intended to keep the English Catholics hopes and confidence high, rather than to fund an autonomous uprising. His objective was not an altruistic crusade to save the English souls, but a pragmatic effort to keep Elizabeth distracted with internal sedition, thereby weakening her ability to interfere in Spain's far more critical concerns, like the revolt in the Netherlands. The policy was designed, as the sources state, "to keep her occupied and wear her down"⁹. The English Catholics were just a means to a geopolitical end: a low-cost, high-impact lever to drain the English resources and divert the Queen's attention from the continent¹⁰.

The colleges also served as a diplomatic bargaining chip in Philip's negotiations with the papacy. For example, the elevation of William Allen to the cardinalate in 1587, after a prolonged papal hesitation, was exploited by the Spanish court to demonstrate a formal, high-level endorsement of the English Catholic care, even though the actual military contribution of Allen's network remained minor and negligible. Contemporary scholars noted that the Spanish Crown's role was far more symbolic than effective in sustaining the exiled clergy, contrasting the earlier historiography that cites the colleges as exemplary evidence of Philip's unconditional support for England's Catholic restoration.

Beyond the financial dimension, the Spanish monarchy also used the geographical placement of the colleges to assert a permanent Spanish presence in the Netherlands, and to project influence over the English religious affairs. The Douai College was situated within the Spanish dominion, allowing Madrid to monitor the English Catholic activity, disseminate propaganda, and maintain a conduit for intelligence that could be mobilized when the diplomatic conditions would have allowed it. The later opening of an English college in Valladolid, accompanied by a royal visit from Philip II himself, further illustrated how the monarch used the institution as a diplomatic showcase, reinforcing Spain's claim to be the official protector of English catholicism, while simultaneously signaling to Elizabeth that her Protestant regime was under a constant Catholic scrutiny¹¹.

This strategy of persistent control and distraction was not confined only to England, but was a core tenet of Philip's foreign policy. He applied the exact same logic to France, where he provided significant financial support to the Catholic League, led by the Guise family. By funding the Catholic faction, Philip deliberately fueled France's brutal Wars of Religion, ensuring the country remained internally occupied by a religious civil war. This policy served a dual purpose: firstly, it prevented the emergence of a strong, unified France that could challenge the Spanish hegemony, and, secondly, it preempted the formation of the catastrophic Franco-English alliance against him, that he so deeply feared. In both England and France, Philip masterfully exploited religious divisions, using the Catholic factions as proxies to destabilize his rivals and protect the strategic integrity of the Spanish empire¹².

The diplomatic history of the Spanish embassy in London, is a fertile field for scholars and shows a vivid illustration of how Spanish political strategy was translated into concrete action far from the king's court and not always following his specific instructions. The ambassadors were not merely messengers, but they represented the instrumental link between Philip's overarching geopolitical calculations and the volatile English political environment. By following the actions of the succession of envoys, we can trace the evolution of Spanish foreign policy, and analyzing his discrepancies from Philip and his council's primary intentions. What externally appeared as a coherent anti-Protestant move was, in private correspondence, qualified, moderated or even contradicted by the king's own advisers and his strategic reflections.

When Philip appointed the fiery Guerau de Espés as his first minister in London, the ambassador entered a hostile environment with a constant control of intelligence spies and repeated humiliation by the English ministers. His diplomatic activity quickly started to lay on his unauthorized encouragement of the English Catholic conspirators. His promise to the Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Arundel of a prepared Spanish military intervention, inevitably inflamed the expectations of the Ridolfi Plot of 1571. However, the Duke of Alba, categorically rejected any such premature venture. In a letter dated 9 May 1570, he warned the king that an invasion would be "a catastrophic error"¹³, given the shortage of funds and the precarious situation in the Netherlands. A Spanish landing would only cement the loss of the Catholic faith in England. The final rupture with the ambassador, arrived with the uncover of Espés' involvement in the Ridolfi conspiracy by the English government. On 14 December 1571 he was expelled, and his response was a scathing memorandum that dismissed the English council as arrogant and an enemy for all nations, also accusing them of creating false incriminations, and attacking particularly one of Elizabeth's primary council, William Cecil¹⁴.

By 1578, Philip replaced Espés with the more erudite and methodical Bernardino de Mendoza, a diplomat whose tenure illustrates how the Spanish foreign policy shifted from evident diplomatic protest, to a subtle intelligence and driven program, that kept English Catholics under Spanish patronage, without committing troops. Mendoza's dispatches are replete with detailed accounts of the English government's persecution against the Catholics. The parliament continued enacting increasingly severe laws against every Catholic suspect, bringing to an uprising number of priests that were arrested, tortured and denied of every basic religious comfort. Mendoza managed to quit a moral case for Spanish interventions that could be presented to the papacy but also to other Catholic allies.

Meanwhile, his private instructions from the king reveal the conditional nature of Spanish support. In a letter of May 1586 Philip II ordered that any money sent to the English Catholics should be limited, expressly saying:

"And thus, from what is sent to you, you will see there the provision that must be made for them, and by what means, and in what manner, and up to what amount"¹⁵.

The king's main purpose was to maintain the English Catholics with a strong sense of trust and optimism toward a Spanish help, but at the same time not to fund or allow an autonomous rebellion. This stipulation was echoed in the king's broader directive to Mendoza:

“receive the English Catholics kindly, consoling and encouraging them in general terms, but you will not enter into any negotiation or plans with them against the Queen”¹⁶.

Mendoza, who also acted as a spymaster, provided Philip with an exhaustive intelligence report on the English naval preparations, supplying a detailed list of the English fleet that would be essential to the later preparation of the *Armada*, even if it was gathered without any accompanying commitment to launch a simultaneous domestic revolt.

Philip's own reflections on the practicality of an English campaign further illuminate the strategic disconnect. In a series of private notes, he repeatedly stressed that he was “not in a position nor possessed of the capacity to undertake”¹⁷ a full-scale invasion. His later missive to the Pope, in 1586 reduced the *Armada*'s true purpose to protecting the Spanish Indian trade and coastlines from English piracy, and that was far from wanting to undertake foreign enterprise. The religious rhetoric that accompanied the *Armada* was thus subordinated to a pragmatic defense of Spain's commercial empire¹⁸.

The two ambassadors embody the dual narrative that characterized Philip II's English policy. Publicly, the Spanish crown projected the image of an indefatigable defender of the Catholic faith: generous pensions to the colleges, the elevation of William Allen to cardinalate, and the open financing of the Catholic conspiracies. These gestures can be interpreted as proof of unconditional Spanish support for an English Catholic restoration. Yet private correspondence of the king, his council, and the Duke of Alba, tells a very different story. The testimony of the Duke's repeated warning against the English Catholics, and Philip's own admission that the kingdom's finances and the Dutch rebellion precluded any serious military venture, revealed a cautious calculus that sought to contain England's threat without overextending Spanish resources.

The Spanish embassy functioned as a controlled annoyance. By keeping the English Catholics under a visible, but limited, patronage network, Philip could distract Elizabeth with the ghost of an internal sedition, limiting her ability to intervene in other important matters on the Continent. This strategy, that, as said, was also applied to France, as to be interpreted as Philip's main political strategy to avoid losing the Spanish supremacy through the Continent, without intervening directly and losing too many finances.

The discrepancies between the public missives, the private counsel of Alba, and Philip's own strategic memoranda, constitute the essential paradox of Spanish policy toward England in the decades preceding the *Armada*. The embassy in London, through the contrasting careers of Espés and Mendoza, mirrors the evolution from reckless provocation to calculated subversion¹⁹.

The dynamic between the Spanish court and the Papacy over the “English question” also reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of Philip II’s reign: the conflict between his long studied role as “defender of the Catholic faith” and his responsibilities as the pragmatic sovereign of an extended empire, led him to constantly delaying a direct military action. From Rome, the perspective was one of acute spiritual urgency. Popes Pius V and, later, Gregory XIII, viewed Protestant England as a festering wound, and a crisis demanding immediate and decisive military intervention. This papal impatience is recorded in repeated and fervent exhortations made to the Spanish King to definitely launch a holy war.

However, Philip consistently met these papal demands not with a crusading zeal, but with a calculated and unbending application of *realpolitik*. His reaction to this pressure was of cautious but firm resistance. When Pius V urged an invasion in 1569, Philip diplomatically sought to “excuse the strange and hasty proposal of the Pope”²⁰, attributing it to the Pontiff’s admirable but naive piety, while quietly instructing Alba to ignore it. A decade later, he explicitly warned against the disastrous papal-sponsored expedition to Ireland, an independent venture that predictably ended in a catastrophe, that handed Elizabeth with a new propaganda victory. Philip understood what the Papacy, in its theological certainty, failed to grasp: a direct, religiously motivated attack on England would be a geopolitical cataclysm, likely uniting Protestant Europe and inviting a French intervention, at a time when Spain could least afford it²¹.

This scrupulous avoidance of a purely religious war, is most brilliantly illuminated by his strategic exploitation of Mary, Queen of Scots. While Philip certainly saw her as a Catholic claimant, her true value laid in the political legitimacy her cause provided. She was the perfect secular pretext: both a dynastic key that could unlock the door to England, without framing the interventions as a Catholic crusade, and the perfect further distraction to keep Elizabeth and her Privy Council occupied. This reveals an astonishingly modern understanding of international law and perception. Even Philip II, the so called champion of the Counter- Reformation, recognized that an invasion justified solely by faith would be seen as an illegitimate aggression. His own instructions laid the strategy bare with devastating clarity, stipulating that the public justification for any action must be political and not religious. His position on the matter is recorded in one of his private letters:

"The title and name that the conspirators are to take in their movement... must be the liberation of the Queen of Scotland and her establishment on that Crown, which is so legitimate and so justified, and with which many inconveniences are avoided that would result from making the title and name of religion the cause, both within the Kingdom and outside of it"²².

It is important to acknowledge that, while historiography has often positioned Mary Stuart as a central motivation for Philip’s English policy, the reality was far more cynical. Although he expressed his desire to support her, following the receipt of her moving letter in 1586, his actions were never decisive. The support he offered was perpetually conditional, limited and designed to shift the primary risk onto the English

Catholics themselves. Mary was not the sacred cause for which Philip was willing to risk his empire; rather, she was a convenient and powerful diplomatic instrument, a *casus belli* to be deployed if and when it suited the cold and strategic interests of Spain²³.

Both in the English Catholic exiles matter, and in his support to Mary Stuart, we can identify Philip's real disinterest to intervene directly in England, limiting his actions to acts that could keep alive the hope for a military intervention, without ever deeply compromising the Spanish resources. Even if the king knew the need of a financial investment as an essential part to provide success to any intervention, his disposition to providing it was clearly limited, as reported in a discussion about his support to the Ridolfi plot:

“In order for the aforementioned collaborators to proceed with their plans and bring them to the desired conclusion, and in addition to being advised and guided as you will have them, it will be necessary that they be assisted with some money, because without it—lacking the necessary means—they will not have sufficient authority, and such a venture cannot be properly organized or completed”²⁴.

Regardless of the crisis after the English Privy Council found out about the Ridolfi plot, and the later possibility of a Spanish invasion in Ireland, Philip never provided troops or economical resources to intervene with a decisive intervention. During his reign, the financial and logistic matters were far more relevant than his religious ideals.²⁵

The later decision by Philip II to launch the “Enterprise of England” in 1588, is far from being the sudden culmination of a purely messianic crusade, but is revealed, through a closer examination of the Spanish state correspondence, to be the culmination of a decades-long policy rooted in a pragmatic *Realpolitik*. While the religious dimension provided a powerful moral justification and ideological framework, it was ultimately subordinated to pressing strategic, political and economic causes. The final impetus for the invasion was not a sudden burst of religious fervor, but a calculated strategic determination that the persistent threat posed by Elizabethan England to the stability of the Spanish Empire could no longer be contained through indirect means.

The primary drivers behind the *Empresa de Inglaterra* were twofold: the escalating English intervention in the Netherlands, and the systematic disruption of Spain's colonial trade by the state-sanctioned piracy. England had evolved from an annoyance into a critical logistical and financial base for the Dutch rebels, rendering a permanent Spanish victory in its rebellious provinces nearly impossible. Simultaneously, the raids of corsairs, like Francis Drake, were inflicting severe economic damage, threatening the flow of silver from the New World, that was the lifeblood of the Spanish state and its military commitments across Europe. Philip's own words, in a letter intended to clarify his motives to the Pope in 15 March 1585, offer a clear articulation of his priorities. He sought to disabuse the Pontiff of the

notion that the invasion was purely religious undertaking, stating his true objectives were fundamentally defensive and economic:

“I am more bound to ensure my own dominions than to undertake foreign enterprise, and it is sufficient for me and my subjects to launch such navies as that which I have commenced, and please God will finish, for the purpose of clearing the sea of pirates protecting the Indian coasts and the flotillas, with the treasure they bring, and ensuring the safety of Spanish trade, which I can do at comparatively little cost”²⁶.

This passage is profoundly revealing: Philip explicitly says that he prioritizes the security of his own dominions over foreign enterprise. He frames the massive naval build-up not as a tool for conquest, but as a necessary instrument for protecting Spanish trade and clearing the seas of pirates. The conquest of England, therefore, was not the end in itself, but the most decisive means to achieve these core strategic goals: to neutralize the primary source of aid to the Dutch rebels and to terminate the existential threat to Spain's Atlantic economy. The religious restoration would be a welcome consequence of a successful invasion, but had nothing to do with the *casus belli* of the military operation²⁷.

Conclusion

This analysis fundamentally repositions the Anglo-Spanish conflict within its traditional historiography. Rather than viewing the relationship between Philip and Elizabeth as one of predestined religious antagonists, this perspective reveals a far more implacable foe, eagerly awaiting an opportunity to impose Catholicism by force. However, the evidence from the initial decades of their reigns points to a Spanish policy characterized by restraint, driven by the monarch's overstretched resources and competing geopolitical priorities.

In the early years of his reign, Philip's primary concerns were the Ottoman threat in the Mediterranean, the consolidation of his authority in the Netherlands, and the delicate balance of power with France. His approach to Elizabeth was marked by a reluctant tolerance, preferring a heretical but independent England, to one allied with and controlled by his French rivals. Even during the principal moments of provocation, such as the Northern Rebellion or the Ridolfi Plot, Philip's impulses were consistently checked by the sober, pragmatic counsel of commanders like the Duke of Alba, who warned that a direct conflict with England would be a catastrophic error, given the lack of funds and the instability in the Netherlands and France. The Spanish support for the Catholic exiles and the instrumental use of Mary, Queen of Scots, were not preparations for an imminent holy war, but low-cost strategies of containment, designed to keep Elizabeth “occupied and worn down” and discourage her from a more aggressive foreign intervention. The shift toward direct military confrontation in the 1580s, was not an expression of long-held ideology, but a reluctant admission that these policies of containment had failed, and that the English threats had grown from a peripheral problem to a systemic danger to the integrity of the Spanish empire²⁸.

This article, therefore, lies within a larger historiographical trend, which has the purpose to reframe the traditional narrative of Philip II's reign. It changes the perspective about the Anglo-Spanish conflict, from one of inevitable religious war to a complex history of strategic calculation, geopolitical constraints, and escalating conflict, replacing the caricature of a religious messianic fanatic, with the portrait of a pragmatic overburdened global monarch grappling with the realities of imperial defense.

The re-examination of Spanish policy through the prism of diplomatic intelligence and private correspondence, invites a fundamental re-reading of the entire traditional narrative governing the Anglo-Spanish relations during the lasting years of the sixteenth century. This shift in perspective opens compelling new avenues for revisiting adjacent historical questions. For instance, the intricate diplomatic triangulation between Spain, England, and France can no longer be viewed simply as two separate bilateral rivalries. Instead, Spanish support for the French Catholic League and its patronage of the English Catholic exiles emerge as two facets of a single, coherent geopolitical strategy: to keep its two primary rivals internally destabilized and thus incapable of forming a united front against Habsburg hegemony. Similarly, the role of the English colleges is transformed from that of purely religious seminaries, into strategic instruments of statecraft. They were not merely beneficiaries of Spanish piety, but assets to be leveraged in diplomatic negotiations with the Papacy, centers for intelligence gathering, and, most crucially, a low-cost mechanism for sustaining a permanent internal threat to the Elizabethan regime. Ultimately, this intelligence-led approach compels a paradigm shift. It moves the analysis beyond a simplistic chronicle of religious conflict, and into the far more complex and revealing domain of *realpolitik*, where ideological fervor served as a justification, but was consistently subordinated to the cold and pragmatic calculus of imperial survival and strategic advantage.

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⁷ "Lo primero, es nación vana, apasionados y arrojados cuando tienen necesidad, y en viéndose sin ella, soberbios enemigos de todas las naciones que ven en su patria", González-Aller Hierro et al., (1988), 149.

⁸ "se perdería completamente la religión católica en Inglaterra", González-Aller Hierro et al., (1988), 42.

⁹ "para mantenerla ocupada y desgastarla", González-Aller Hierro et al., (1988), 41.

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¹⁸ González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 63-524; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., II (1988), 13-320; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., IV (2014), 84.

¹⁹ González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 4-361; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., II (1988), 13-26; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., IV (2014), 84.

²⁰ "disculpar la extraña y precipitada propuesta del Papa" González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 41.

²¹ González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 41-496; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., II (1988), 90; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., IV (2014), 468.

²² "El título y nombre que los coligados han de tomar en su movimiento... ha de ser la liberación de la Reina de Escocia é introducción en aquella Corona, que es tan legítimo y tan justificado, y con el cual se excusan muchos inconvenientes, que del hacerse título y nombre de religión para dentro del Reino y fuera resultarían." González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 58.

²³González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 15-510; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., II (1988), 402.

²⁴ “Para que los dichos coligados puedan proceder en su trato y llevarle al término que se desea, demás de ser aconsejados y guiados como por vos lo han de ser, será necesario que sean ayudados con algún dinero, porque sin él no teniendo ellos tanta facultad, mal se puede semejante negocio enderezar ni acabar” González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 147.

²⁵González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 41-155; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., IV (2014), 74.

²⁶ González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., II (1988), 317.

²⁷ González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 40-70; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., II (1988), 8-317; González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., IV (2014), 193.

²⁸ González-Aller Hierro, J.I., et al., I (1988), 39-71.