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CP World History

Period 4

Mrs. Pool

“To what extent is the defeat of the Spanish Armada a political turning point in world history?”

In the 1500s, Europe was emerging out of the Middle Ages to take its place on the international stage, compete with other world powers, and demonstrate its newfound political power and influence. While the people of Europe were long dormant in societal advancement and discovery since the end of the great Classical Era, rising European countries would become influential powers by competing with growing rival countries and conquering the world. Spain, a rising European power, proudly claimed discovery of the New World and intended to dominate two separate continents separated by the Atlantic Ocean. These triumphant steps for the rise of the Spanish were countered by England and the conflicts between them. The famous naval battle between England and Spain would shift the direction of world history and determine which country would lay claim to the title of supreme world power. The Spanish Armada's defeat was not the largest turning point in the history of maritime warfare compared to the later development of ironclad ships in the 1800s. However, the Spanish Armada's downfall was still a major political turning point in world history because it decreased Spain's influence and power across Europe, preserved the monarchy and Protestant culture of England, and allowed gun-armed sailing warships to dominate maritime warfare for centuries.

Prior to Spain's planned invasion of England, tensions between England and Spain were elevated by religious differences along with a broken marriage alliance. King Henry VIII divorced his first wife Catherine, a Spanish princess, to marry his second wife Anne Boleyn in 1533 (Konstam). The divorce created more tension with Spain because of the destroyed alliance. When King Henry VIII's daughter, Queen Mary I, rose to power, she caused even more conflict within England by persecuting Protestants (Konstam). She was a devout Catholic, yet her half-sister Queen Elizabeth I, was a devout Protestant (Konstam). The Protestant Reformation and ongoing fighting and disagreements between Catholics and Protestants heightened the

problem. The English Civil War resulted in Mary's imprisonment and Elizabeth's ascension to power (Konstam). Elizabeth's Protestant England became an enemy of Spain, which supported Catholicism. Prior to England's civil tension, Spain was a growing national power, threatening the English state. Spain had already sponsored an expedition to the New World led by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The Spanish regarded themselves as the rulers of the Americas based on the decision of the Treaty of Tordesillas, which gave Spain all land in the Americas except Brazil. (Konstam). Elizabeth, fearing the expansion of Spanish power, launched raids against Spanish trade, attacked cities in the Spanish Indies, and supported Dutch rebels against Spanish rule (Crews). Due to the warfare and religious tension between Spain and England, King Philip II of Spain, already in possession of 30,000 land troops under the command of the Duke of Parma in the Netherlands, planned to send these troops across the Strait of Dover with his armada and invade England ("Spanish Armada"). His main goal was to restore Catholicism in England and end the attacks against Spanish trade and Spain's colonial possessions ("Spanish Armada").

The Spanish Armada was situated in the English Channel by the end of July in 1588, not knowing it was soon to be defeated. The Spanish and English fleets were equal in numbers, but the English ships had multiple advantages (Crews). Spanish ships were slower, and English ships were not only faster, but also had superior gun power ("Spanish Armada"). The English strategy was to bombard the enemy from a long range rather than use the Spanish strategy of boarding ships ("Spanish Armada"). The main commanders, Alonzo Perez de Guzman (Spanish) and Charles Howard (England), were both capable leaders in maritime warfare, but the English strategies would eventually triumph over Spain's dependence on the strength of its foot soldiers for boarding an enemy's ships ("Spanish Armada"). Queen Elizabeth promised victory to her

people in her speeches, raising their morale by exerting confidence (“Elizabeth I”). Under the command of Howard, on August 8, 1588, the English ships destroyed the formation of the Spanish Armada in the Battle of Gravelines by sending fire ships into its midst (Konstam). Though Spanish morale was still high, the wind prevented the Armada from traveling West and out of the Channel. Since the English fleet blocked their way back, the Armada made a hasty retreat north, and was forced to journey all around the Northern tip of Scotland (Crews). Several ships were wrecked off the coast of Ireland, and because of the weather and lack of food and water, few soldiers and ships returned home to Spain, leaving England to celebrate its victory (Crews).

The powerful hold that Spain possessed over its colonies and the New World drastically fell in the years after the Armada’s defeat, resulting in a decline in Spain’s global dominance. Many ships did not return from the battle, and it was a heavy blow to the strength of the Spanish military. In fact, only around two-thirds of the original fleet and half of the original soldiers returned to Spain (Crews). Its remaining military was further weakened as Spain’s Philip II sent two more invading Armadas to England, both unsuccessful. The result of these battles created a stalemate and a peace treaty was signed in 1604 after the death of both Philip II and Elizabeth I (Konstam). The Spanish Armada never again had the strength to try and conquer England. The decline of Spain’s military meant that it would struggle with maintaining global power. The defeat was also accompanied by an economic depression. Spain’s massive wealth acquired from the New World decreased; too much wealth had been spent on wars that were lost with little gain, and the country suffered from inflation and economic decline (Crews). Suffering with failed domestic policy, Spain’s foreign influence decreased as its resources were diverted from its colonies and towards its homeland. Spain’s military resources were diverted from France and

its hold on the Netherlands. The Netherlands also gained independence from Spain, which was later officially recognized by Spain in 1648 (Crews). The loss of Spain's international prominence would later be replaced by England's colonial expansion in later centuries ("Spanish Armada"). Though Spain's influence in the New World had been extremely powerful, power in Europe diverted away from Spain and halted its growing power.

Because the Armada's defeat saved England from invasion, its monarchy and Protestant culture were preserved, allowing England to grow in world power in place of Spain. The growth of England cemented the major turning point in supreme European power. In the immediate aftermath of the victory, the respect that the citizens of England had for Queen Elizabeth grew steadily. During the battle with the Spanish Armada, Elizabeth took a strong stance while reassuring her people through speeches and their admiration grew for their queen ("Queen Elizabeth"). They respected her courage in the face of the threat, and they had high morale in the wake of their victory ("Queen Elizabeth"). Had the Armada won, Queen Elizabeth could have been killed or forced to make political negotiations in favor of Spain (Konstam). The preservation of Queen Elizabeth's Protestant rule instilled a psychological lift for Protestants against Catholics (Konstam). The united country under a growing religious sect became a powerful nation. If the Spanish Armada had won, Catholicism might have been re-established in England, or at least partially tolerated under the influence of Philip II (Konstam). The balance of Protestant and Catholic countries in Europe would have changed, as well as England's alliances with other Protestant countries. However, because England won the battle, the strength of England's navy continued to grow after the victory and its confidence increased. Previously, Elizabeth's father King Henry VIII had developed English naval power, but the English Royal Navy continued to grow under Elizabeth's influence and victory (Konstam). England had proven

that its naval ships were superior to the Spanish, and its influence began to spread in place of the old Spanish empire. Like Spain, England would sail to the New World and establish colonies there, along with other colonies across the seas. The impacts that the English Royal Navy would have on the rest of the world would allow for the creation of new colonies and countries (Konstam). Without the growth of the English navy, the North American colonies might not have been formed at all, nor might they have had the same influence under Spanish rule. The defeat of the Spanish Armada was a major political turning point because it prevented a different course of world history: one where Spain would have ruled as the most influential country in Europe and in the New World.

Because the Spanish Armada's defeat was also the first major naval gun battle under sail, it would institute a style of naval warfare based on gun-armed sailing warships, overriding old methods of maritime battles. Since England was the victor in the battle, the design of their ships and their style of warfare would influence change in ship designs and strategies. During the battle, Spanish ammunition and gunpowder was very ineffective because it could not fire as fast or far as the English guns (Dougherty). Their cannons were made of bronze, in contrast with the English iron cannons, which became more common (Dougherty). The English used their cannons against the Armada for efficient long range attacks (Dougherty). Spanish strategies such as boarding the enemy's ships became outdated in place of using cannons ("Spanish Armada"). It would be cannon and gun-armed sailing warships used for long distance attacks that would dominate maritime warfare for the next 250 years ("Spanish Armada"). Besides the style of warfare, the design of ships was changed to a more-maneuvrable, quicker English-style warship instead of the heavier design of vessels used by Spain (Dougherty). Spain also began a naval revolution after their loss, and learned from the design of the English ships in order to defend its

colonies overseas in the future (Dougherty). However, England's naval power was on the rise before Spain was able to catch up to it. England's new war-sailing ships would provide examples to other countries and allow it to have dominance at sea and establish the British Empire (Dougherty). This was a major political turning point based on warfare because maritime battles entered a new era (until the development of ironclad ships) where ships were used at farther distances from each other to inflict damage.

A larger turning point in the history of maritime warfare than the Spanish Armada's defeat was the development of ironclad ships in the 1800s which replaced old wooden ships. Ironclad ships had iron platings, sometimes around 11 centimeters thick that protected their hulls ("Ironclad"). Unlike the kind of wooden ships used in the Armada, they were less vulnerable to fireships, cannons, or heavy guns blowing holes into them and sinking them. The English, being continually advanced in naval warfare, were the second country to build ironclads after France. The ironclads were revolutionized in many battles, including the Battle of Hampton Roads in the United States Civil War where, for the first time, two ironclads engaged in battle against each other (Koenig). During this famous battle, the Southern ironclad ship, the *USS Merrimack*, was shellproof, while also having great offensive abilities (Koenig). The northern wooden ship, the *USS Congress*, had its hull set on fire by the *Merrimack*'s shells, while the *USS Merrimack* suffered little damage because of its protective iron plates that were impenetrable to many damages (Koenig). In the Spanish Armada battle, though England had more powerful ships, they still suffered damage to their ships, whereas ironclads would rarely have any damage when competing against their wooden counterparts (Konstam). As steel and iron would become even more common materials for ship construction, it would be the ironclads, and not the ancient English wooden ships, that would evolve into modern battleships ("Ironclad"). While the

Armada's defeat advanced gun-armed wooden sailing warships, ironclad ships were overall a more commanding maritime warfare turning point because of their durability.

Despite the military effects that the Spanish Armada's defeat created, its influence on Spain and England would shape world history by virtue of who won the battle. The defeat of the Spanish Armada by England was a major political turning point because it created lasting consequences for the world. Spain, which had been the dominant world power prior to the battle, lost its leadership because of the defeat of its military. The Armada's defeat dethroned Spain and installed England as the supreme international power. The world and its politics would be forever changed by colonial expansion, a supreme navy, and England's quest for power.

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