

James I and His Foreign Policy

James was a foreigner in a strange country surrounded by opposing parties all wanting concessions from him. He was in a no win situation, which sadly at times his character and lack of common sense were to aggravate.

At the start of his reign he inherited a debt of around £400,000 from Elizabeth's wars with Spain. To have carried on the war would have crippled James' treasury. His only real option was to make peace with Spain in 1604. However, this annoyed war-hungry men like Raleigh (he hated the Spanish), offended national pride against Spain, and sent a message to Puritans that he was sympathizing with the Catholics. The Puritans wanted an aggressive anti-Catholic policy from James.

James was a peace lover and his dream was for a peaceful, united Europe, irrespective of religion. He was going to end forever the religious dissensions of Europe. This was a very tall order as the hate felt between many Catholics and Protestants was similar to that displayed by the sectarian violence in modern day Ireland. Years of persecution by each other would not be forgotten overnight. His motto was "Peace on Earth, Goodwill towards men" James' plan was as follows and was similar to the one carried out by Henry VII, who married off his children to promote peace in Europe. Like Henry, James saw the financial benefits both in savings and substantial dowries.

1. His eldest son Henry would marry a Spanish Princess.
2. His eldest daughter Elizabeth would marry Frederick, Elector Palatine, one of Europe's leading Protestant Princes of Germany.
3. Catholic and Protestant rulers would thus be united by a family tie and would live side by side under his fatherly guidance. (Paternal Government)
4. James also had to consider France. Henry IV was Catholic, but France feared Spain. James could not make a full alliance with France as this would offend Spain. What James did agree with Henry about, was that James would train an army in England, paid for by French money, which could be used if Spain attacked France.

This was a Utopian vision, but there were serious obstacles in its way.

1. The English dreaded the thought of a future King brought up by a Catholic mother, and Parliament would not agree to the marriage.
2. Henry (son) was not in favour of this marriage. However, he died in 1612, of smallpox and Charles became the Prince of Wales and replaced him as a potential and more willing bridegroom for the Spanish Princess.
3. Philip III would only accept the marriage on certain conditions: a) Any children from the marriage were to be brought up Catholic, b) If any of the children succeeded to the throne of England, they were to remain Catholic and not be forced to convert to Protestantism. c) Catholics in England were to be given freedom of worship. When the Spanish complained about Sir Walter Raleigh, James ordered his execution, because he didn't want to offend the Spanish. Raleigh was now expendable.
4. In 1619, the Thirty Years War between the Catholic League and Protestant Union broke out.

The Thirty Years War.

In 1619, the Holy Roman Emperor died and his successor, Ferdinand, a Catholic Hapsburg took over. At the same time he succeeded to the throne of Bohemia, much to the concern of the majority of Bohemia's nobility who were Protestant and refused to accept him as their King. They invited Frederick of the Palatinate, a German Protestant Prince to take the throne.

Ferdinand gathered up an army and marched to Bohemia to deal with the rebellion. Frederick appealed to James for help as James' daughter Elizabeth, was married to Frederick. James was in a difficult predicament. Why?

1. To support a vassal like Frederick against an overlord like Ferdinand would set a bad example and contradicted his beliefs about Divine Right of Kings. Ferdinand was God's representative in the Holy Roman Empire.
2. If he supported Frederick it might damage the marriage negotiations between his son Charles and the Spanish Infanta.
3. James disliked war and felt that diplomacy and negotiation could solve any problems.
4. James could not afford the cost of a war.

Ferdinand defeated Frederick's army at the Battle of White Hill in 1619. James still refused to help, much to the disbelief of Parliament and the English people who supported Frederick. James hoped to persuade Philip III of Spain (nephew of Ferdinand) to help him end the conflict peacefully. A naive belief that a Catholic would help a Protestant!

Sadly for James, Spanish troops invaded the Palatinate, but still James believed that diplomacy was the way forward. Gondomar, a Spanish ambassador was sent over to keep James out of the war by discussing the possible marriage between Charles and the Infanta. When Parliament met in 1621, they let James know about how they felt. They were prepared to fund a war. However, James ignored their pleas and carried on with his plans to marry Charles to the Spanish Infanta. In 1623, Charles and the Duke of Buckingham, traveled incognito to Spain as Tom and John Smith. On their arrival the Spanish increased their concessions before they would allow the marriage to go ahead. Charles tried to agree to their demands and made promises that he knew he would or could not keep. The last straw for Charles came, when the Spanish refused to return the Palatinate to Frederick, his brother in law. Charles returned to England empty handed.

The rest of the country and Parliament were delighted at the failure of the marriage negotiations. Charles and Buckingham wanted war, and even now James was beginning to feel insulted and realised that his dream of a united Europe had been shattered.

In 1624, Parliament met,

1. Money was voted for a war with Spain
2. An alliance was signed with the Dutch and Danes
3. Arrangements were made for Charles to marry a French Princess, Henrietta Maria.

4. An army under the command of Mansfeld, a German mercenary, was sent to win back the Palatinate. However, the army was unpaid, ill equipped, badly trained and soon ravaged by disease. It achieved nothing of value.

Parliament had at last got what it wanted - a war with Spain.

- James had ultimately failed with his policy, but has at least kept England out of war for almost 20 years.
- Unlike, Henry VII, he failed because he was ruling at a time when Europe had been ravaged by a religious schism, and his fellow rulers had little desire to see any reconciliation.
- James' personal battles with Parliament also hindered his plans.
- In conclusion, it would seem that James' beliefs, however laudible and humanitarian, were in the end, out of place with the times.