



Conflicts of Empires: Spain, the Low Countries and the Struggle for World Supremacy, 1585-1713

Jonathan Israel

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The period between the late sixteenth and the early eighteenth centuries was one of tremendous, and ultimately decisive, shifts in the balance of political, military and economic power in both Europe and the wider world. Spain's overwhelming dominance in the 1580s seemed unassailable, yet by the Peace of Utrecht in 1713 its greatness had been eclipsed, leaving supremacy to Britain, France and, in the commercial sphere, the Dutch. In these essays (five of which are previously unpublished) Jonathan Israel argues that Spain's efforts to maintain her hegemony continued to be centred on the Low Countries. One should not readily assume that Spain's order of priorities was misconceived: at times she appeared to be close to succeeding. Both France and Britain were deeply riven by religious, political and social divisions during a large part of the seventeenth century. While it is true that after Spain's final defeat, at the Peace of the Pyrenees (1659), French preponderance within, and British supremacy outside, Europe seemed increasingly probable, the overthrow of James II in 1688 might well have been the prelude to political chaos and civil war in Britain. While long-term economic and social trends played a large part in shaping the outcome of events, it is also true that the impact of personalities and short-term contingencies could often be decisive.

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