Charles V and the Holy Roman Empire: Crash Course World History #219

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to talk about the Holy Roman Empire. Which, as Voltaire famously pointed out, was not holy, or Roman, or an empire. But the Holy Roman Empire can help us understand world history, especially during the reign of it's most powerful emperor, the smart and sensible and hard-working Charles Hapsburg (known as Carlos I in Spain and Charles V in the rest of Europe). So let's frame it this way: in soccer, the World Cup is like, a pretty big deal, especially for me.

MFP: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! But I'm not even good at soccer.

You're actually not that bad, me from the past, but the only two things you put into your body are Wendy's and cigarette smoke, and that's not great for your athletic career. In 2014, the final pitted Germany against Argentina, and if that game had been played in 1550, both of those teams would have had the same head of state. The 2010 final, between Spain and the Netherlands; again, the same head of state, Charles V. Unfortunately, the 1550 World Cup had to be postponed until after soccer was invented.

(Intro)

So, Charles V ruled one of the biggest empires in history, behind only Genghis Khan, Joseph Stalin, and Stalin's successor's in the Soviet Union. In addition to claiming to rule most of Europe during Charles' lifetime, one of his dominions, Spain, laid claim to nearly all of the new world outside of Brazil, and a few of his subjects, the miserable survivors of the fleet of Ferdinand Magellan, became the first known humans to circumnavigate the globe. Under Charles the template for the colonization of the Americas and the Christianization and treatment of it's indigenous people was laid down, and Charles gave his seal of approval to the Jesuit order, to convert Asia. He underwrote the first mission settlements to California and began the process of turning the islands known as the Philippines into Asia's largest Spanish speaking country. But he wasn't just a conqueror, Charles also hosted the Valladolid Debates, the first discussions of universal human rights, and he actively sought to end slavery for many, although not for all, and he didn't really succeed in ending it for anyone.

Yet for all that Charles V isn't known as a giant of world history. I mean his realm, the Holy Roman Empire, was ultimately a failed state, and his reign a bitter disappointment, even to himself. Trying to rule an empire stocked with rebellious subjects, including Martin Luther, and with territory in two hemispheres, Charles V managed to totally bankrupt his realm, and that was kind of impressive. Because he had access to the silver and gold of the new world, the Renaissance banking fortunes of Italy and the Netherlands, the military power of Spain. In short, Charles V was, to the Holy Roman Empire, what Screech is to the Saved by the Bell alumni.By the time he died, crippled with gout and malaria at the age of 58 (wait, are we still talking about Screech? No, apparently we're talking about Charles V now) anyway the Holy Roman Empire was defaulting on massive debts to it's creditors.

So, among historians, the debate over whether Charles could have been a successful emperor tends to break into two schools of thought: one argues that the Holy Roman Empire was doomed to fail, largely because it lacked the nationalism that powered the rising nation states like France and England. But Voltaire was probably right, that the Holy Roman Empire was doomed from birth. Over it's 1004 year history the Holy Roman Empire never had the means of levying direct taxes, or directly raising an army from it's territory, which nearly always included was are today eastern France, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, the Italian peninsula, and Czechoslovakia, and at times stretched to The Netherlands and Belgium, Hungary, Croatia, Poland, and western Ukraine. Governing such a vast area is almost impossible, especially when you have to have, like, you know, people on horses to deliver messages. These days, even with the internet, governing Europe isn't that easy, ask the European parliament how it's going.

So the H.R.E. began in 800 C.E. as a marriage between the Germanic warlord Charlemagne and the only sort of war lord-y Popes in Rome. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, western Christendom was basically a flock of rural warriors who reveled in trials by combat, Christian conversion through combat, and just generally combat. And Charlemagne shrewdly recognized that the churches mainly literate hierarchy and command of tradition were his best possible instruments for governing his battle-loving feudal lords. So Charlemagne and Pope Leo III struck a deal: Leo would bestow upon Charlemagne the authority and tradition of the Caesars while Charlemagne acknowledged the Church's spiritual superiority over his secular power. And the name for this agreement reflected the terms of the deal: Holy, because the church wanted top billing, Roman, to give Charlemagne maximum prestige among his feudal subjects, and Empire because they wanted it to be an empire.

Here's a lesson in romance from history: marriages of convenience? Mmm, yeah? So the relationship between the Popes and the Emperors grew a bit rocky over time. In the centuries after Charlemagne one European warrior clan, the house of Hapsburg, fought to claim the emperor's throne and to establish dominance over the papacy. And one the tactics used by the Hapsburgs was the promote dynastic marriages between Hapsburg cousins, thus keeping inheritances within the family and out of the hands of the church. This Hapsburg inbreeding worked politically but over the centuries it brought out recessive family genes for mental illness and, most famously, these oversized lower jaws, that became Europe's most recognizable profile. In short: inbreeding, great way to keep money in the family, maybe not the best way to keep A++ kings in the family.

The papacy fought back, and in 1356 the position of Holy Roman Emperor was turned into an elected position, candidates for the crown henceforth needed to win support from at least 4 of 7 electors. Now this didn't prevent the Hapsburgs from reclaiming the throne, but it did force the family to pay fortunes in bribes and favors to win it because, as always, money wins elections. Charles was no exception, and the bribes he paid to secure his position as emperor in 1521 meant that he started off his rule in debt, which is never a great idea. But wait, you say, now that he's emperor he can just tap into a loyal group of subjects who will be more than happy to pay tax increases in order to pay off Charles' debt. But, yeah, that's not how the Holy Roman Empire worked, Alright, let's get to know this emperor, in the Thought Bubble.

Charles' parents came from two ambitious dynasties, his mother, Joanna, was the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, who you've probably heard of, and from Joanna Charles laid claim not only to Spain, but to parts of Italy, including Naples and Sicily, as well as what became known as the Americas. Charles' father was the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Fair, and through Philip, Charles could claim the German lands of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, Philip's father. So Charles' existence was pretty much a genetic engineering job, designed to produce a ruler of Spain and Germany, only Charles was neither Spanish nor German himself. He grew up in Belgium, in the Dukedom of Burgundy, which technically made him a French subject. And ruling over so many desperate people was a recipe for trouble, like German peasants in Frisia had revolted against the empire in 1515, but they weren't nearly as troublesome as the Germans living in town. By the time Charles bought his throne in 1521, German merchants had come to think of themselves as being guaranteed the rights to speak in a parliament, to have a say in their taxes, and even to form their own militias. Protestantism was also a big headache for Charles,

especially when Luther and his followers claimed that they followed their conscience in matters of religion, rather than the emperor's will. Charles thought that he solved this problem when he faced Luther at the Diet or Worms in 1523, but that didn't work out quite as planned.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So at the Diet of Worms, Luther was so compelling when talking about his faith that he became more popular, not less. And, shortly thereafter, he began his famous German translation of The Bible. So, obviously, governing most of Europe was a tremendous difficulty for Charles V, but he also had to be the ruler of all of the Americas (except for Brazil). I can't help but notice, Stan, that Brazil is always the exception of the Americas.

(Brazil Montage)

And with the Spanish conquistador's subjugation of the American Indians by the late 1530s, Charles' life got even worse, or, arguably better. Because he was richer, and had more subjects, which is the point of of being an emperor, I guess? So unlike most of the Spaniards in Spain's colonies, Charles actually showed some concern for his Native subjects, but he couldn't really do much. Like in 1520, after receiving a steady stream of complaints about how the Native people were being abused, Charles banned the granting of new encomiendas and ordered his officials to phase out the old ones. And this worked not at all. Hernán Cortés and other leading conquistadors completely ignored Charles' orders and just kept doling out encomiendas. And then Charles sent new orders, saying that the Indians are "To live in liberty, as our vassals in Castile live... if you have given and Indians in encomienda to any Christians you will remove them." Cortés responded: "The majority of the Spaniards who come here are of low quality, violent, and vicious." Well, I guess he was self-aware. Anyway, his response amounted to: we could only get Spanish people to come here if they have the right to exploit other humans. And then in 1526 Charles gave in and allowed Cortés, and later Pizarro, to issue temporary encomiendas to their men.

Now, so far, Charles isn't looking so good in this story, so it might be useful to compare his record to those of his contemporaries, who, in theory, ruled more coherent and governable states. And it just so happens that Charles reigned at this same time as two of Europe's most notable proto-nationalistic leaders: England's Henry VIII and France's Francis I of France. The bitterest rivalry was between Francis and Charles, because Francis believed that Charles, as the Duke of Burgundy, which is in France, was his subject. Charles, meanwhile, new that Francis had attempted to win the title of Holy Roman Emperor himself, and had warned the electors that Charles was an unfit and despotic man. If we could just stop for a moment, why on Earth would anyone fight to become the Holy Roman Emperor?

The two monarchs fought four separate wars against each other, and according to proponents of nationalism, Francis should have had the advantage, right? Because he had unchallenged power of taxation in France and a religious class that was loyal to him, and a population (or, at least, an elite) that all spoke French. But Charles' troops won every war. Not only that, in the course of the wars, Charles' troops managed to take Francis himself hostage, at the siege of Pavia, and sack Rome in 1527, ending the Pope's hope of becoming a real player in secular politics, and, according to some scholars, ending the Italian Renaissance. Charles also fought a war against Suleiman and the Ottomans, defeating them at Vienna, although he wasn't able to stop Suleiman from consolidating his control over the formerly Hapsburg territory of Hungary.

But, despite ruling this fractious, polyglot empire, rather than a compact national state, Charles did okay for himself. Well, at least by some measures. By other measures, he was a total failure. Oh, it's time for the open letter. But, first, let's see what's in the globe today. Oh, it's all of my past romantic relationships. An open letter to failure:

Dear failure,

You're so often in the eyes of the beholder, like what looks like failure at one point in your life can later look like a wonderful success. I mean, Charles V had a lot of successes but ultimately, he viewed his reign as a terrible failure. That's why he eventually abdicated and retired to a life of full time beer drinking. And then he split up his empire with his brother, getting the Holy Roman Empire, and his son, getting Spain. And that was probably, marginally at least, a good thing for both the Holy Roman Empire and Spain. In short, failure, almost no person is merely a failure, or even merely a success. So, enough with all these falsely constructed dichotomies, failure, they are complete failures.

Best wishes,

John Green.

So the story or Charles V reminds us of something we learn again and again when studying world history: that there are multiple sides to every piece of history. Yes, the Holy Roman Empire under Charles V ceased to be holy, in the sense that it was no longer 100% catholic, it was never Roman, since Latin wasn't among the many languages spoken there, and it wasn't much of an empire because it was too diverse and spread out for Charles really to have the power of an emperor. But, as with most history, and many Facebook relationship status', and one Meryl Streep movie, it's complicated. But perhaps one concrete lesson that we can take away from the history of Charles V is the benefits of acknowledging the limits of one's power. Charles never did. His imperial motto was *Plus Ultra*, and that means further beyond, but it could also mean limitless. Charles sought to fuse Atlantic and central Europe into a seamless whole on a scale the size of today's European Union. He tried to stamp out the Protestant Reformation and make his response, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, global. He tried to create new policies in the new world while still defending old policies in the old world, and by trying to be the most powerful emperor in the most powerful empire in the history of the world, he failed spectacularly. There's a lesson in that for all empires, and all nations states, and even all people. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

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