

## Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

- Within Europe there are two leading families whose lands border each other: the Habsburgs (Spain and Germany) and Valois (France).
- From the Netherlands all the way down through Italy, these two mighty dynasties battle for territory and influence, especially when the buffer state of Burgundy collapses following the death of Charles the Bold in 1475.
- Against this background, the clash between Ottomans and Christians, between Protestants against Catholics quickly emerge too and add their own flavour to Habsburg-Valois rivalry.
- For example, the French form alliances with the Muslim Turks and the Protestants against the Habsburg Holy Roman Emperor.

### 1. Iberia: Ruled by the Habsburgs

- Contains three Kingdoms – Portugal, Castile (very wealthy) and Aragon (rather poor).
- We use the term 'Spain' very loosely to refer to the area but this is dangerous, even though they become increasingly close throughout this period, following the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile (1469)
- This move towards a Spanish Nation State was accelerated by the defeat of a Portuguese invasion (1474) and the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors in 1492.

### 2. Holy Roman Empire: Ruled by the Habsburgs

- Roughly equates to present-day Germany (Switzerland was theoretically a part of it but, protected by natural frontiers, the Emperor had not been able to prevent its Cantons had joined in a confederation).
- Presided over by an Emperor, who is voted into the job for life by 7 Electors representing over 300 independent states, Free Towns and Imperial Cities.
- His role is defined by the 'Doctrine of the 2 Swords' – i.e. he represents the religious interests of the Church, and the secular interests of his Princes.
- This is problematic in both respects:
  - (a) Princes tried their best to prevent Emperors getting too much power (favour localism / particularism rather than universalism- we can find parallels here with the clash between pro-Europeans and Euro-sceptics) and resist their attempts at the Imperial Diet (Parliament) to raise either taxes or an Imperial Army or to obtain taxes except in dire emergencies.
  - (b) Popes demand that Emperors make sure Churches in the HRE pay their taxes to Rome, even those are increasingly causing great unrest and resentment – which will ultimately lead to the Reformation.

### 3. France: Ruled by the Valois

- Has the largest area, biggest population and richest agriculture of any country
- Much of its strength owed to Louis XI (The "Universal Spider"), who had conquered many outlying regions.
- Charles VIII, a dwarf, proceeds to conquer the whole of Italy in 1498;
- King Francis I is the major figure of our period though; he was a rival of Henry VIII who beat him in a wrestling match!
- But its administration, legal system and economy remained decentralised, and the country was torn apart by the Wars of Religion in the latter part of the century.
- Ended by Henry IV who famously converted to Catholicism to secure his position ('Paris is worth a mass') but was later assassinated.

#### **4. Italy: Fought over by both families**

- Like 'Spain', this is more of a geographical expression than a true state.
- Italy is in fact a mishmash of various States, each of which is fiercely competitive for political influence and the Mediterranean trade which it had developed during the Crusades.
- The competition and wealth of these city states (along with the development of modern warfare) was partly responsible not only for the Renaissance but for the devastating wars which ravaged the peninsula for most of our period. The 5 key states were -  
*Venice* – consisted of the lagoon city and territory on the mainland (briefly lost to invaders in 1509). Republic ruled by a 'Doge' and leading families, strong economy.  
*Milan* – the least stable; taken over by mercenaries (Visconti, then Sforza).  
*Florence* – dominated by the Medicis, although family feuds were common.  
*Papal States* – straddled central Italy, nominally ruled by Popes, who are trying to reassert their position in this period following the Great Schism; Alexander VI in particular tries to carve out a state for his son Cesare in the Romagna.  
*Naples* – poor feudal Kingdom battled over by France and Aragon.

#### **5. Britain**

- Then as now, Britain can be broken into Wales, Scotland, England and Ireland; although the theme of this period is England aiming to centralise control rather than devolve it; England has been in Civil War (the Wars of the Roses) for much of the previous 50 years (which also saw England lose all of its French possessions bar Calais) but is now finding stability under the Tudors.

#### **6. Ottomans**

- The greatest threat to the stability of Europe in this period, as far as the Christian countries were concerned, was the advance of the Muslim Turks, known as the Ottomans.
- As well as their terrifying success in capturing Constantinople in 1453, they made massive advances in Africa and the Balkans and used Barbary pirates to stifle Christian control of the Mediterranean – some felt that they were poised to take over Europe.
- Although traditionally regarded as a shady force on the periphery of European events, they were in fact inspired, disciplined and efficient administrators and warriors.
- Extra zeal was given firstly by the concept of Jihad or Holy War, and secondly by the fact that nobles had no independent power base (only holding land in return for service to the Sultan) - even the head of Government, the Grand Vizier, was a slave to the Sultan.

#### **Task**

- Use whatever sources you have available to you to produce a 16<sup>th</sup> Century travel brochure for one of the above countries, including such details as: Geography; Population; Economy; Political and Social structures; Key personalities; Religion; key events in the period.
- The brochure must
  - (a) Be in ink and colour
  - (b) Include an illustration
  - (c) Be written in a jaunty style – if a particular fact is not very palatable, then try to turn it round (e.g. "we suffer regularly from food shortages, which is great for those of you who aim to lose weight on your holiday", "We brutally torture any dissidents, thus ensuring a secure and safe political environment").

