

# Spanish Empire

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The Spanish Empire, sometimes referred to as the Hispanic Monarchy or the Catholic Monarchy, was a colonial empire that existed between 1492 and 1976. In conjunction with the Portuguese Empire, it ushered in the European Age of Discovery. It achieved a global scale, controlling vast portions of the Americas, Africa, various islands in Asia and Oceania, as well as territory in other parts of Europe. It was one of the most powerful empires of the early modern period, becoming known as "the empire on which the sun never sets". At its greatest extent in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Spanish Empire covered 13.7 million square kilometres (5.3 million square miles), making it one of the largest empires in history. Beginning with the 1492 arrival of Christopher Columbus and continuing for over three centuries, the Spanish Empire would expand across the Caribbean Islands, half of South America, most of Central America and much of North America. In the beginning, Portugal was the only serious threat to Spanish hegemony in the New World. To end the threat of Portuguese expansion, Spain conquered Portugal and the Azores Islands from 1580 to 1582 during the War of the Portuguese Succession, resulting in the establishment of the Iberian Union, a forced union between the two crowns that lasted until 1640 when Portugal regained its independence from Spain. In 1700, Philip V became king of Spain after the death of Charles II, the last Habsburg monarch of Spain, who died without an heir. The Magellan-Elcano circumnavigation—the first circumnavigation of the Earth—laid the foundation for Spain's Pacific empire and for Spanish control over the East Indies. The influx of gold and silver from the mines in Zacatecas and Guanajuato in Mexico and Potosí in Bolivia enriched the Spanish crown and financed military endeavors and territorial expansion. Spain was largely able to defend its territories in the Americas, with the Dutch, English, and French taking only small Caribbean islands and outposts, using them to engage in contraband trade with the Spanish populace in the Indies. Another crucial element of the empire's expansion was the financial support provided by Genoese bankers, who financed royal expeditions and military campaigns. The Bourbon monarchy implemented reforms like the Nueva Planta decrees, which centralized power and abolished regional privileges. Economic policies promoted trade with the colonies, enhancing Spanish influence in the Americas. Socially, tensions emerged between the ruling elite and the rising bourgeoisie, as well as divisions between peninsular Spaniards and Creoles in the Americas. These factors ultimately set the stage for the independence movements that began in the early 19th century, leading to the gradual disintegration of Spanish colonial authority. By the mid-1820s, Spain had lost its territories in Mexico, Central America, and South America. By 1900, it had also lost Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippine Islands, and Guam in the Mariana Islands following the Spanish–American War in 1898.