Why did the Spanish Armada Fail?

In 1588, a war was announced upon England by the Spanish Phillip II. This declaration was decreed following the execution of the Catholic sister of Queen Elizabeth, Mary Queen Of Scots, and the surfacing of 'The Babington Plot' in the eyes of the Spanish. The execution, at the time, had reduced the Catholic threat to the throne. However, The Spanish were still eager for any chance to kill Elizabeth and restore England to its Catholic roots, as well as to deplete a powerful and strong trading enemy. They were given this chance when it was made clear that Sir Francis Walsingham had been intercepting messages to and from Mary, whilst she was under imprisonment, in order to frame her. The utter defeat of the Spanish Armada is a highly withstanding and accepted fact- and the sheer amount of vital flaws on the side of the Spanish were just as pivotal to its defeat as the superior actions of the English- there were several major reasons for such a failure- leadership and command, the overall plans of invasion and defense and strategic moves and tactics.

Philip II first started to formulate plans to invade England in as early as 1559 - just after Elizabeth had turned down his recommendation of marriage. Not only was he upset from her rejection but he also felt that he had a duty to protect the Catholic religion in England. Nonetheless, being king of the most powerful country in the world, Philip had many other things to worry about until the real planning started. By 1586 English sailors like Sir Francis Drake had started attacking Spanish ports and Spanish treasure fleets. Elizabeth was also giving aid to the Protestants in the Netherlands rebelling against the Spanish commandment. In the summer of 1588, a huge fleet of about 120 ships were congregating in Lisbon Harbour. On board was the most supreme army in the world; if it landed it would be unstoppable. Despite inadequate provisions being loaded, the fleet set sail on 20 May, set for Flanders where they would meet up with the Duke of Parma, who oversaw the Netherlands for Philip. Parma had a fleet of pontoons and transport there for the attack on England. The man in charge of the Armada was the Duke of Medina Sidonia, one of the richest aristocrats in Spain. When Philip chose him to lead the Armada he was shocked. He had spent all his life avoiding military experience and now he has to command a fleet! In fact he suffered from terrible sea sickness.

One of the greatest reasons for the failure of the Armada was the people at the top of the chain of command. It would be expected, Elizabeth and Philip lead the English and Spain respectively during the conflict. How very different knew nothing of naval affairs and had very little to contribute at all in battle at least in a strategic sense similar to Phillip- however much can be said about their individual characters by their manners of leading. Elizabeth admitting and accepting her lack of military ability instead passed down her full command to Drake. Parma chose to insist on devising and planning such an extensive and ambiguous campaign himself- believing that if this plan was a king- God would guide him and deliver him victory- and this sort of religious and personal arrogance was one of the main reasons for the failure of the Spanish Armada. Phillip’s religious beliefs were so strong and so stubbornly so that when Alvaro de Bazan 1st Marquis of Santa Cruz who was a highly competent admiral, he replaced him with the latter’s complaints for no reason other than that he was a good Christian. The Duke of Medina Sidonia had like Phillip no military experience. Such was his level of conceit, that he would often ignore his most experienced military consultants whom on more than one occasion questioned the feasibility of the plan. The Spanish needed good weather for their venture to succeed. As it was the summer they could reasonably expect such weather. But they got day after day of strong gales. Soon after the fleet left Lisbon it was hit by a ferocious storm and had to flee for shelter into the harbour of Corunna.

Unlike English ships, which were small and agile, the Spanish ships were big and clumsy. They were hard to operate and they struggled in bad weather. While the fleet was in Corunna the Duke of Medina Sidonia, wrote to Philip suggesting that they abandon the expedition. The delay at Corunna was potentially catastrophic, because the Duke of Parma gave up waiting for the Armada instead he sent the crews of his own ships to work on the canals inland. However, the Armada did finally leave Corunna, then on 29 July 1588, people on the coast of Cornwall sighted the fleet. Communications were very poor in the 16th century, yet the English had developed a way of informing London when the Armada was first seen. Beacons were lit along the coast. As soon as one beacon was seen, the next further along the coast was lit. When the beacons reached Beachy Head in Sussex, they went inland and towards London. In this way, London was quickly made aware that the Armada was approaching England. As the Armada sailed up the English Channel, it was attacked by an English force lead by Sir Francis Drake. He was stationed in Plymouth. It is said that when Drake was informed of the Armada's approach, he replied that he had time to finish the game of bowls he was playing on Plymouth Hoe and time to defeat the Armada. It is possible that he knew that the tide of the River Tamar in Plymouth was against him, so that he could not get his ships out of Devonport - therefore, he knew that he could finish his game of bowls as his ships were dependent on the tide movement.