Eighteenth Century Spain

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Historians have tended to see eighteenth century Spain as going through a long-term decline, one which had begun in the seventeenth century and which would culminate in the loss of Spanish America in the early nineteenth century. Spain’s patchy performance record in the eighteenth century, as reported in the despatches found in the State Papers series, SP 94: Secretaries of State: State Papers Foreign, Spain of successive British diplomats and consuls in Spain – when the two countries were not at war – gives some credence to such negative assessments, but also challenges them.

Spain’s eighteenth century can be divided into two halves. The first half comprises the reigns of the first Spanish Bourbon, Philip V (1700-46), the designated successor of the last Spanish Habsburg, Carlos II (1665-1700) and of Philip’s son, Luis I (1724), who succeeded to the throne following Philip’s abdication in 1724. Philip resumed the throne later that same year after Luis’s early death from smallpox. This half century was one in which the global Spanish empire or Monarchy was transformed in terms of its territorial composition, the relationship between the various territories, and the authority and real power of the monarch. We should not exaggerate the transformation, or underestimate the degree of continuity between Habsburg and Bourbon Spain. Nevertheless, real change followed the arrival of the new dynasty.

The first challenge facing Philip V was to secure his hold on the Spanish throne as the Austrian Habsburg archduke Charles, the future Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI (1711-40) challenged Philip’s right to the crown in the major conflict we know as the War of the Spanish Succession, fought inside and outside Europe. It was only brought to a close by the peace settlements of 1713 (Utrecht) and 1714 (Rastatt-Baden), although Charles and Philip did not end their own quarrel until 1725 when they concluded the peace of Vienna. Philip effectively won the succession struggle, retaining the Spanish throne, although his failure to retain Italy (below) meant that the victory was for him incomplete. By the end of the war he had also advanced some way towards transforming Spain by ending the near autonomy of the territories of the Crown of Aragon (Aragon, Catalonia, Valenciac); their support of archduke Charles was designated rebellion and their reconquest from 1707 onwards resulted in the loss of their privileged position within the Spanish state. Philip V’s Spain was by no means a wholly absolutist, centralised and unitary state – Navarre and the Basque territories which had remained loyal to Philip in the succession conflict largely retained their autonomous status – but it was much less of a “composite state” than when Philip had succeeded in 1700.

Philip had also retained Spanish America, i.e. Cuba and much of the rest of the Caribbean, Mexico, Peru (the latter now eclipsed by the former as the main centre and source of American wealth) and the Philippines. However, Philip had been obliged to make concessions there to secure peace with Britain, the paymaster of the coalition opposing him in the war of succession. These included granting Britain for 30 years the lucrative contract (or asiento) to supply Spanish America with slaves – a concession operated by Britain’s South Sea Company - and the right to send one ship a year to trade with Spanish America. These concessions were a major breach of Spain’s traditional policy of excluding legal foreign trade from the Americas; they would also be exploited to cover extensive breaches of the Spanish
monopoly. Philip had also been obliged to confirm the British wartime conquest of Gibraltar on the Spanish mainland and of the island of Menorca in the Mediterranean, where Philip had also lost Spain’s north African outpost, Oran, to the Moors in 1708. Outside Spain, Philip had also lost Flanders and various territories in Italy: Sardinia, Sicily, Naples and Milan. Philip resented these losses and concessions and for the rest of his reign sought to overturn the Utrecht settlement, at least insofar as it affected the Mediterranean (including Italy) and the Atlantic. He also sought to contain English expansion on the American mainland, for example into Georgia. These revanchist ambitions ensured that between 1713 and 1748 Spain posed, along with Russia, perhaps the greatest threat to peace in Europe. Monarchs and ministers everywhere were alarmed by reports of Spanish preparations for war, and their representatives in Spain paid very close attention to them just in case they were to be diverted against – in this case – Britain. In pursuing his Italian objectives, Philip was powerfully supported by his second wife, Isabel or Elisabeth Farnese, who Philip married in 1714. Isabel, who had dynastic claims of her own on Tuscany, Parma and Piacenza, was concerned about her own future should Philip die, and about that of her sons, since the sons of Philip’s first marriage would succeed him in Spain. For many contemporary commentators, Philip – not brought up to rule, shy, lacking in self-confidence, subject to occasional mental ill-health which might be countered by the king’s delight in war, and dependent on his consort – was really pursuing the policies of Isabel in his Italian ambitions, herself a forceful and fiery character as most who dealt with her noted. There is some truth in this. But it underestimates Philip’s own determination to recover an inheritance in Italy (and elsewhere) which he had been deprived of – as he thought – by force and illegitimately in the succession struggle. To achieve these revanchist objectives, between 1713 and 1748 Philip launched successive overseas expeditions: the reconquest of Sardinia (1717), of Sicily (1718), of Oran (1732) and of Naples and Sicily (1734-5) when Spain joined Philip’s nephew, Louis XV of France (the first so-called “Family Compact”) and the king of Sardinia against the Austrian Habsburgs in the War of the Polish Succession (1733-38), after which Isabel and Philip’s eldest son, Don Carlos, was installed as king of an independent realm, that of The Two Sicilies, although this was initially a Spanish satellite. During the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48), Spanish troops again intervened in Italy, briefly occupying Milan (1745-6). At the end of that war another son of Isabel and Philip, Don Felipe, was installed as duke of Parma. These operations involved substantial forces – the reconquest of Sicily in 1718 and later that of Oran both mobilised about 30 000 troops besides large numbers of warships and troop transports in what were major amphibian operations. Whilst in the last decades of the seventeenth century Spain’s weakness had preoccupied European policy-makers, in the decades after 1713 it was, not surprisingly, Spain’s renewed vigour which caused them concern.

Spain’s new strength reflected important changes in its defence establishment. Thus, whereas before 1700 Spain’s army had effectively been deployed abroad – the Army of Flanders, the Army of Lombardy - after 1713 Philip developed a permanent army based in Spain itself and averaging about 80 000 men, and many more in wartime, reinforced by a reformed militia from 1734.
Philip also rebuilt Spain’s fleet, which was crucial both for imperial defence and for more aggressive revanchist operations overseas. By the late 1730s that fleet included upwards of 50 warships. This royal navy was reorganised into three naval departments (Cadiz, Ferrol and Cartagena) and a French style scheme involving the registration of seamen was introduced to ensure crews were found for the king’s ships. Maintaining a larger, more permanent defence establishment was very expensive and necessitated the expansion of the royal revenues. The continued importance of the revenues derived from Spanish America was another factor in the need to preserve Spain’s monopoly there, and also influenced changes in colonial government, exemplified by the establishment in 1717 (and made permanent in 1739) of the new viceroyalty of New Granada.

The military, naval and fiscal apparatus depended, finally, upon an effective administration. Here the old Habsburg system of conciliar administration was overhauled, in favour of a system of government by secretaries of state overseeing specialist departments: War (the army), Marine (the Navy), State (foreign affairs), Finance and the Indies. In the localities, the minister of Finance was able to rely on intendants, although these were not permanently entrenched before 1749. The effectiveness of these changes was enhanced by being overseen by some very able chief ministers. These included the Italian, Cardinal Giulio Alberoni, and the Spaniards, Jose Patino, who rose from intendant of Marine to de facto chief minister a position he held until his death in 1736. Jose Campillo, and from 1743 the Marques of Ensenada.

George I and George II, their ministers and their subjects could not ignore the transformation of Spain in these decades, which was followed closely in the reports from Spain’s capital of successive diplomats and those of the consuls in Spain’s major ports – Alicante, Barcelona, Cadiz, La Coruna, Malaga. Those reports reflected the great commercial interests Britain had in Spain. They also represented invaluable intelligence which might be crucial to the defence of Britain and its interests against a refurbished and revanchist Spain, because Spain’s revival clearly affected Britain, who was herself the architect and chief beneficiary of the peace of 1713. British ministers were anxious not to anger the Spanish Court, because British merchants had great commercial interests in both “Old” Spain – where their legal trading rights rested on a treaty of 1667, which Philip V confirmed – and in “New” Spain, i.e. Spanish America. British ministers also feared that a disaffected Spain might exploit the Jacobite threat. They were right to do so, because Philip V was among the European rulers most likely to support the Jacobites: thus in 1738-9 Jacobite hopes rose as war loomed between Britain and Spain.

War loomed because it proved very difficult to maintain good relations. In 1718, in order to defend the 1713 peace settlement, a British fleet defeated that of Spain off Sicily at Cape Passaro – a largely forgotten British victory – effectively ending Philip’s conquest of Sardinia and Sicily. Philip thereupon despatched an invasion force to Scotland in 1719 although it proved abortive. Thereafter, British ministers sought to accommodate – even appease – Spain. Although they could not accommodate Philip’s desire to recover Gibraltar (which his forces besieged in 1727) in 1731, following the conclusion of the Treaty of Seville (1729) in which Philip confirmed British trading privileges in Spain and its empire, British ships helped convoy Don Carlos to
Italy where he was installed as duke of Parma. Nevertheless, tensions persisted and despite the existence of a powerful body of opinion in Britain that feared the impact on legal trade of war with Spain, an equally powerful body of opinion pressed for war with Spain. The latter was aided by the impact on opinion at home of the harsh measures taken by the Spanish coastguards in protection of Spain’s American monopoly, which fuelled almost constant complaints by the British ministers in Spain.13 In 1739 the Walpole Government was obliged by public opinion to go to war with Spain over the efforts of Philip’s government to restrict British exploitation of the asiento and permission ship. This Anglo-Spanish struggle, the so-called War of Jenkins’ Ear, which from 1740 onwards was effectively part of the European War of the Austrian Succession, meant a rupture of diplomatic relations and of the flow of reports in SP 94 until the resumption of formal relations at the end of 1748. A successful British attack on Portobello in 1739 augured well, but was followed by unsuccessful assaults on Cartagena, Cuba and Panama in 1741-2. In 1742 a belief that Walpole’s government was not pursuing the war against Spain as wholeheartedly as it should led to the fall of Walpole, demonstrating the extent to which foreign relations – and more particularly relations with Spain – affected Britain’s domestic politics in this period. The British failures in the Caribbean also demonstrated the continued real strength of the Spanish empire.

1748-89

The end of the War of Jenkins’ Ear/ War of Austrian Succession in 1748 meant a resumption of formal diplomatic links and ushered in a period of what should have been better relations between Britain and Spain. This was not least because in 1750 a deal was done that put an end to one of the great irritants of the previous decades, the asiento and the permission ship, the South Sea Company being promised compensation of £100 000. However, difficulties continued. Thus the death of Philip V – succeeded by the far more pacific Ferdinand VI (1746-59) - and the removal of Isabel Farnese’s influence was accompanied by an abandonment of Spain’s Italian ambitions and what might be termed a “turn to the Atlantic”, associated primarily with the marques of Ensenada and with an ambitious programme of naval reconstruction. This programme was perceived by the British minister in Madrid, Sir Benjamin Keene, as so threatening to British interests that he plotted covertly with Ensenada’s domestic enemies to topple the minister in the summer of 1754.14 However, the fall of Ensenada did not resolve all difficulties, not least because ministers in Madrid continued to worry about the threat posed by British sea power to Spain’s transatlantic empire and sought to ensure that Spain remained a considerable naval power and therefore a threat to Britain. Ferdinand refused to join France against Britain in the Seven Years’ War, despite French offers of Minorca and of a joint attack on Gibraltar if he did so. But, English captures of Spanish ships caused new tensions, and even more alarming was the implication of British success in America which threatened both the Spanish position there and – more broadly - the balance of power. Following the accession of the childless Ferdinand’s half-brother, Charles III (the former Don Carlos) (1759-1788) and the conclusion of the [second] so-called “Family Compact” between Bourbon Spain and Bourbon France (1761), which was directed largely against Britain, relations between Britain and Spain again broke down, and Britain
declared war in January 1762. Spain’s intervention proved disastrous, 1762 seeing the British capture of Havana in Cuba and of Manila in the Philippines. These were stunning losses, and although both places were returned to Spain at the end of the war, Spain was obliged to cede Florida to Britain, and to accept the loss of fishing rights off Newfoundland and the presence of British logwood cutters in Honduras in central America, the dispute about which had long been a ground of complaint on both sides. Spain’s only compensation for these considerable losses was Louisiana, ceded to it by its ally France.

Defeat in the Seven Years’ War was one of the triggers for a remarkable programme of sometimes “enlightened” reform at home and abroad in Spain from the 1760s, one of whose objectives was to improve imperial defence. Measures included the steady dismantling of the rigid control of American trade, although foreigners were still largely excluded by law. British ministers and diplomats took a great interest in these and other measures, such as the life annuities project (1769), Harris sending a printed prospectus regarding one such scheme to London in 1780. Diplomats also reported the response to these measures, both in Spain, where Charles III faced serious riots in Madrid and elsewhere in 1766 (which many suspected were not spontaneously popular but co-ordinated by disaffected members of the elite affected by reform), and in Spanish America, where the unsettling impact of reform was evidenced by revolt in Quito in 1765. In these reports, and in sending regular, tabulated details of British shipping in Spain’s ports from the 1760s onwards, British diplomats and, even more so, consuls were responding to a new or more pronounced concern on the part of ministers in London to be better informed about Britain’s overseas trade.

However, difficulties continued. British merchants continued to complain almost constantly about the inspection of their vessels by Spanish officials in supposed breach of the treaty of 1667, while in 1768 relations were strained over the wish of the daughter of consul Hardy at Cadiz to convert to Roman Catholicism. In 1770, Spain and Britain came close to war over the Falkland Islands, and such a conflict was only avoided by the reluctance of France to support Charles III. Unaided, Spain, despite Charles’ reforms, would find it difficult to pursue its quarrel with Britain. The crisis, and a need to confront Portuguese expansionist ambitions in South America contributed to a decision in Madrid to create a new viceroyalty of the River Plate (in what is now Argentina). Closer to home, however, Spanish weakness was exposed by a disastrous expedition against Algeria in 1775.

By the late 1770s, George III’s ministers were understandably concerned about how Spain would respond to the developing imperial crisis in British North America, as it escalated into a European conflict following the intervention of France in support of the American rebels. In 1779 Charles III decided to join in the American war and that same year launched, with France, what has been called the “second Armada” against England. It proved as unsuccessful as the first Armada, that of 1588. But that was not the limit of Spanish efforts to exploit British difficulties: another siege of Gibraltar was launched, although this proved as abortive as that of 1727. However, at the end of the war in 1783, Spain recovered Florida, which had been conquered by Spanish forces in 1780-81, and Menorca...
and was promised satisfaction regarding the Honduran log-cutting settlements.

By 1783, when formal diplomatic relations between Britain and Spain resumed, reports about and from Spain passed to the newly-established Foreign Office. For all its difficulties, Bourbon Spain had performed better than is often thought. Spain and its empire in 1789, on the eve of the French Revolution, was in good shape, extensive (and expanding in North America), wealthy and a power which, as the reports in SP 94 and the invaluable Spanish materials consuls and diplomats often sent to London clearly demonstrate, could not be ignored by Spain’s neighbours, rivals and potential enemies.

NOTES

[2] For that reason, Sir Benjamin Keene’s reports from Spain in 1732, SP 94/111, are an invaluable source of information on the preparations for the reconquest of Oran that year.
[4] For Isabel’s domination see SP 94/85, Bubb Dodington to James Stanhope, 19 Feb 1716, cited by Lynch, Bourbon Spain, p. 76.
[5] According to SP 94/126, Keene to Walpole, 17 Aug. 1736, “Broils must be thought on, to keep the king in motion, and the Minister in Credit”.
[6] In 1739 the consul at La Coruna sent a plan of the new base at Ferrol to London: SP 94/224, Parker to Newcastle, 24 Aug. 1739.
[9] For one obituary appreciation of Patino, cf. SP 94/126, Keene to Walpole, 6 Nov. 1736.
[14] See SP 94/146, Keene to Robinson, 10 June 1754.
[16] See SP 94/182, Harris to Weymouth, 23 Nov 1769.
[17] “…it was easy to see that those persons who (if it had been an insurrection of the common people only) would have had reason to be frightened, did not however show the least apprehension”, SP 94/173, Earl of Rochford to Henry Seymour Conway, 31 March 1766, cited by Rodriguez, ‘The Spanish Riots of 1766’, p. 127.
[18] Cf. SP 94/173, consul Hardy to Conway, 11 April 1766, plus enclosed Account.
[22] There is much on this expedition in SP 94/198, 199.
[23] SP 94/198, Hardy to Rochford, 13 June 1775 [no. 24].

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