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Revolutions, 1810-1840

Michael P. Costeloe

Excerpt

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I

An introduction

On 2 February 1944 the distinguished scholar, Melchor Fernández Almagro, began his inaugural lecture to the Spanish Royal Academy of History with the following hypothesis. If one was to stop passers-by in the streets of Spain and ask, ‘When did Spain lose its American Empire?’, the answer from most people would be 1898, the year when in fact Spain lost the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines which were no more than the final, comparatively insignificant remnants of the once great American empire. Some people, he added, might perhaps reply with an earlier date but few would be precise, and it would be rare indeed to find anyone who knew of the battle of Ayacucho of 1824 which effectively marked the end of Spanish rule on the American continent. Why then, Fernández Almagro wondered, has the loss of Spanish America left so slight an impression in the collective Spanish memory? The answer, he suggested, lay in the fact that the wars of emancipation in America left little or no impression on the generation of Spaniards who lived through and witnessed Spain’s humiliation and defeat. Hence with the first impression faint, memories faded quickly and the disaster of Ayacucho and all that it implied was soon forgotten.¹

I would venture to suggest that if one conducted a similar opinion poll in Spain today, the answers would still be as Fernández Almagro predicted. The loss of America does appear to have had little impact on general Spanish public opinion at the time when it occurred, despite the relative rapidity with which the monolithic imperial structure disintegrated. The empire, arguably the greatest the world had ever seen, was lost between 1810 and 1824. In those few years, revolution spread throughout the colonies from Chile in the south to Mexico in the north. The continent and its sixteen million people, colonized and governed by generation after generation of Spaniards for more than three hundred years, rejected all Spanish authority.

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The once great viceroalties were replaced by new republics and the political, economic and strategic map of the world was radically altered. Yet, at first sight, most Spaniards do indeed seem to have had little or no interest in these momentous events and at best were indifferent towards the fate of their empire. There is no sign of any public expression or sense of national disaster, or willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of preserving the imperial heritage.² Government attempts to levy special taxes for the war effort in America were met with the usual evasive tactics that often greeted taxation. For example, a small surcharge was added to theatre tickets throughout Spain, but the theatre owners refused to collect it. A similar levy was put on tickets for the bullfights, but the *aficionados* also refused to pay. Retail businesses were required to pay an insignificant amount in additional taxation, but again the shopkeepers refused to cooperate. Attempts to raise loans for the war effort from the wealthy sectors of society met with the same resistance and hostility. Volunteers to fight in the colonies were few, and of those who were voluntarily or otherwise enlisted in the expeditionary armies, many promptly deserted in America, some unwilling to risk their lives in war but others to join the rebel forces.³

In the decades which followed the battle of Ayacucho, there is also an intriguing absence of comment or reference to America where one might expect to find at least some observation, if not a profound reaction and inquisition into what had gone wrong. There are histories of the reign of Ferdinand VII who ruled, albeit intermittently, from 1808–33, written in the 1830s onwards, which scarcely mention America. There are memoirs by men who, in the 1860s, looking back over their lives provide detailed, informative accounts of the events of their time and yet, in some of these, there is no reference at all to America.⁴ For such well-known observers of the public scene as Mesonero Romanos and Mariano Larra, the latter writing his myriad articles in the 1830s and 1840s, the empire already seems to have been forgotten and not a matter of any concern. Spain's great novelist, Pérez Galdós, author of a series of historical novels covering the years from 1808 onwards, and known to be diligent in his pursuit of sources and historical accuracy, makes only passing and superficial reference to the wars in America, and permits his characters almost no opinions on what Spaniards felt about the loss of their empire.⁵ One modern literary historian, surveying the thousands of novels published in the nineteenth century as a whole, states, 'It is a fact that the indepen-

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dence of America is not reflected in, nor did it inspire, any important novel in the nineteenth century.⁶ Similarly, no Romantic dramatist or poet in Spain seems to have found any inspiration in the heroic or tragic aspects of the emancipation movements, the frequently used symbols of liberty struggling against tyranny, nor in the colourful and larger-than-life images of Simón Bolívar and the other great liberators of their nations.

There are several possible explanations for this absence of widespread public reaction, or faint impression, as Fernández Almagro put it. The most likely is the historical context in which the revolutions in America took place and the relative significance which the imperial problem assumed for Spaniards when seen against other events of their age. For many, there were other issues of fundamental and, clearly for some, greater significance in the evolution of peninsular Spain. The Napoleonic invasion of 1808 and the subsequent war of Spanish independence obviously preoccupied people and politicians until the final expulsion of the French armies in 1814. Those years of war also heralded the emergence of liberal reformers who sought to dismantle the institutions and practices of absolutism and to replace them with their vision of a progressive, secular society based on constitutional monarchy. Prolonged conflict with the reactionary forces of the *ancien régime* was inevitable and although some of the issues were resolved either by war or by time, the pattern of chronic instability, fiscal crisis and military intervention in civil affairs was established.

Not surprisingly, therefore, given the constant ideological, economic and social ferment, their more immediate difficulties were paramount in the minds of Spaniards and the problems of their distant empire did not intrude directly into their lives. To some extent, it is also true to say that for the great majority of Spaniards, the empire had never been of any obvious or tangible importance. Throughout the 300-year-old-union, the material links between Spain and America were the concern of only a small minority. In addition to the upper levels of the colonial bureaucracy and ecclesiastical hierarchy which had always been largely staffed by officials sent from the peninsula, the only social group closely involved in the affairs of the empire was the merchant community. Spanish policy since the sixteenth century, however, had consistently been to restrict the transatlantic trade to a comparatively small group of privileged ports and merchants. Even after the liberalization of the commercial code

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in the second half of the eighteenth century, approximately 90 per cent of all Spanish trade with America was conducted through the port of Cádiz.⁷ Other ports traded with the colonies but only as a negligible proportion of their total foreign trade, whereas Cádiz was wholly dependent on the colonial trade for its affluence and, indeed, its survival as a major city-port. It was there that the merchant companies, shipowners, insurance brokers and many ancillary professions had earned their fortunes and made their city into the most prosperous in the peninsula. But, the main beneficiaries of colonial commerce in the good times were also the first victims in the bad and, when the wars in America brought about the collapse of trade, Cádiz rapidly declined into poverty and stagnation. Much of the impetus and the money for the war effort against the dissidents was to come from Cádiz, but often its pleas for greater urgency and action by central government met with no response and even outright hostility, precisely, as was frequently stated at the time, because they came from a minority and obviously vested interest group. The Cádiz merchants had been a privileged minority for too long and their contemporaries both knew and resented it. Hence among fellow merchants in other areas of Spain who traded with but were not dependent on America for their livelihoods, there was little sympathy for their plight. Rafael Catalá, a young Barcelona-based merchant whose family firm occasionally traded with the colonies, expressed this quite succinctly. In 1813, in a private letter, he wrote: 'I could not care less if we separated from that damned rabble; anyone who saves his skin in the present circumstances will be lucky.'⁸

For most Spaniards, therefore, for the rural peasants, the urban workers, the majority of the middle and upper classes, America was detached and seemingly unrelated to their daily lives and from which they personally derived no immediate benefit. Even though the legal imports of colonial produce which such people consumed – sugar, coffee, cocoa, etc. – declined, the little evidence we have seems to suggest that there was no significant scarcity or prolonged price rise in these commodities.⁹ Alternative sources of supply and the contraband trade probably provided the balance.¹⁰ It is clear within this context of national and personal priorities that there was, to use Vilar's phrase, no 'outburst of collective passion' by the Spanish people when they were confronted with the possibility of the loss of their American empire. Yet this picture of apathy or indifference displayed by the majority of the Spanish people does not tell the whole story. Slight

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though the reaction was of the general public, at least as far as we can deduce, it would be wrong to assert that the passing of Spanish rule on the American continent went unnoticed by Spaniards or that all Spaniards were indifferent to or unaware of the immeasurable consequences for their nation of the loss of its imperial power. On the contrary, from the monarch and his ministers to politicians, clergy, bureaucrats, merchants, shipowners and those ordinary Spaniards who had business or family ties with the colonies, all desperately sought every means open to them to reconcile the dissident Americans and to restore imperial harmony. Of course, it was in the realm of politics and in the corridors of power where the decisions had to be taken and where the consequences of failure for Spain were most discussed. Some historians have been misled by the apparent public apathy into believing that the American issue always remained on the fringe of political affairs, overshadowed by the more immediate domestic conflicts in the peninsula. This is only partly the case, for the 'pacification' of America, as it became known, was constantly in the minds of governments throughout the reign of Ferdinand VII and vast amounts of time and resources, both human and material, were expended in vain attempts to achieve it. Although irreconcilable differences of opinion over the future nature of the political, social and economic evolution of the monarchy dominated the public scene, the views of men of all shades of the political spectrum from radical progressive to extreme reactionary were almost uniform with regard to the subject of American independence. Spain's position rested on a single, consistent policy; recognition of independence would not be granted. That fundamental position was maintained throughout the reign of Ferdinand VII irrespective of whether the country was governed as a constitutional monarchy under the control of liberals or by Ferdinand in full possession of his powers as an absolute monarch. It provided possibly the only point of consensus in the ideological ferment of the age and the attitude of the liberals at Cádiz and Madrid during the two periods of constitutional government (1810–14; 1820–3) differed little, if anything, in substance from that prevailing during the years of absolutist rule by Ferdinand (1814–20; 1823–33). There were clearly individual exceptions and varying degrees of flexibility, but, whereas it might be, and indeed, was expected by Americans and foreign interests at the time that the liberals would be more inclined to compromise than the absolutists of the *ancien régime*, this proved not to be the case. The traditional labels – conservatives, liberals, progres-

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sives, reactionaries, constitutionalists, absolutists etc. – tell us nothing in respect of men's attitudes towards the colonial wars. Men who were wholly committed to the defence, for example, of popular sovereignty and the right of a people to self-government refused to extend their sacred principles to America, while others who declined to countenance any significant change in Spanish society were willing to be at least pragmatic when it came to seeking ways and means of resolving the imperial crisis.

The overall objective of retaining the empire, even if in a new form, was, therefore, shared by men of all political persuasions. The constitutionalist and absolutist régimes were willing to consider any measure which offered the hope of achieving this objective and the policies actually adopted by both were the same in most cases. For example, the belief, followed by the practice, that using military force to suppress the insurgents offered the best hope of success originated in the Regency and liberal-dominated Cortes at Cádiz in 1811. It was actively pursued during the remaining years of the first constitutional period and when Ferdinand was restored to full regal power in 1814, he and his advisers did not change the policy except to prosecute it in a stronger form. During the second constitutional era of 1820–3, the hope that military force was still a credible option was not abandoned and there were still those who campaigned for it, even though the practicalities of the situation were by then such that little military action was in fact undertaken. Nevertheless, despite the all too evident reality of the nation's military and financial impotence, Ferdinand and his advisers continued throughout the 1820s to plot and dream of reconquest, even to the extent of authorizing a futile and humiliating attack on Mexico in 1829. The same continuity of ideas and policy applied in most areas. Mediation by Britain or another foreign power was first discussed at Cádiz and the possibility was investigated on many occasions throughout the absolutist years until at least 1819. Direct negotiations with the rebels, peace envoys, the offer of concessions and myriad other proposed avenues that were explored were almost all initiated at Cádiz and remained within the global policy options of all Spanish governments until Ferdinand's demise.

There was a widespread and often expressed feeling that national honour was at stake and that to acquiesce in the separation of the colonies and thereby admit military defeat was dishonourable, even years after the military phase of the revolutions was over. For politicians, merchants, journalists, diplomats and others, a persistent

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belief, or perhaps hope, endured that the wars in America were not being fought with the aim of complete independence but rather to achieve an improved relationship with the Mother Country. Spaniards found it difficult to accept that the people of America, especially the white creole population as a whole, sharing as they did a common language and above all, religion, were really seeking to break all the ties of kinship and cultural heritage which bound them in so many ways to the peninsula. It was this belief that underlined and encouraged many of the reforms that were devised and offered to the insurgents and the policy of responding, for the most part positively if belatedly, to any and all American demands, always short of full independence. Furthermore, the attitude of Spaniards and their reactions were to a considerable extent determined by their interpretation of what had caused the revolutions in the first place. There was no agreement on any one or more causes, but it is significant that the array of explanations put forward in Cádiz from 1810 to 1812 was much the same as those advanced by Ferdinand's advisers and again by the liberals in the 1820s. One important exception is evident in the analysis of causes, but it again illustrates the widely held assumption common to both liberals and conservatives that a negotiated solution to restore imperial unity was always possible. The liberals often attributed the emancipation movements to the system of government, that is absolute monarchism, under which the overseas provinces had been ruled for so long. The construction of a liberal, constitutional monarchy with all that that implied in terms of individual rights and liberties was for the reformers a sure way of reattracting the loyalty of Americans, since they would at least in theory be treated in the future on equal terms with peninsular Spaniards. Hence the new constitution was paraded as the panacea to resolve all imperial difficulties, both in 1812 and in 1820. At the same time, however, the absolutists were convinced that it was precisely the collapse of the existing system of government in Spain, brought about by the French invasion and the bourgeois revolution, which had caused the rebellion of the Americas. Thus at Cádiz they thought, once the French usurpers were expelled, the liberal experiment dismantled and the *ancien régime* headed by Ferdinand restored, so the colonial subjects of the Crown would loyally return to the imperial fold. They held the same view a decade later, blaming the reintroduction of the 1812 constitution for stimulating the fresh outbreak of revolt in colonies which had seemed to be pacified.

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Such attitudes explain in part the continuity of Spain's consistent refusal to recognize American independence and the persistence of the same general solutions to the problem regardless of the ideology of the government in office. There were clearly variations in emphasis, particularly in the debate over the effectiveness or otherwise of military force, but the differences rarely represented any basic change of attitude. Usually they were reactions to the fluctuating circumstances of the time within the political and financial situation in the peninsula and even more so to the changing fortunes of the royal armies on the fields of battle. Yet, although the reunification of the empire remained the common aim, there was no agreement over how to achieve it. Indeed, for some contemporary participants assessing the events in retrospect, it was the disagreement over means that prevented the realization of the agreed end and prevented the adoption of any coherent or coordinated response towards the revolutions during the reign of Ferdinand VII. Instead there was fierce controversy over the best way to deal with the situation and all governments were bombarded with suggested ways of pacifying the insurgents. The sheer quantity was too great for the government bureaucracy to handle and in December 1816, the Navy Minister, José Vázquez Figueroa, angrily denounced the inefficient administrative system in which decisions were being lost in 'a real morass of conflicting papers'. Five years later, the same confusion prevailed and the ever increasing mountain of paper scattered throughout the administrative offices of government seriously delayed the then liberal administration's attempts to produce a policy.¹¹ In some respects, this bureaucratic chaos was no more than a reflection of the diversity of interest groups concerned or affected by the fate of the empire. The interests of institutions, public and private, the rivalries of domestic Spanish politics, the secret intrigues and ambitions of individuals, the intervention of foreign powers and many other factors all conspired to prevent the emergence of any systematic or logical policy. Faced with ever-conflicting advice from so many directions at once, governments were uncertain and always hesitant, preferring to try simultaneously inherently contradictory measures. For example, as already stated, there was a strong lobby, during both liberal and absolutist régimes, in favour of using as much military force as could be mustered to suppress the alleged insurgent minority of Americans. At the same time, there was a lobby against the use of force on the grounds, usually, that it was impractical, ineffective and counter-productive. A third group

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postulated that only direct negotiation with the rebels could produce a long-term solution. A fourth maintained that Spain must demonstrate its military capacity first, in order to persuade the Americans to negotiate. A fifth insisted that foreign mediation was essential but should be supported by at least the threat of military force. Confronted with these and many other pressures, not least the instability at home, all Spanish governments sought to pursue these and other policies simultaneously. Concessions were offered to Americans at the same time as military expeditions were being dispatched.

There is no doubt that the policy-making machinery and administrative structure hindered the decision-making process and contributed to the general confusion. The Spanish bureaucracy of the time was already notoriously inefficient and it was obviously not helped by the frequent changes in the fundamental law and political system of the monarchy. Irrespective of the régime in power, however, arriving at and implementing decisions was slow and cumbersome. During the constitutionalist years, the Cortes debated American affairs on many occasions but every proposal had to be examined and reported on by diverse and often overlapping committees. At times, months elapsed only for the eventual decision to be irrelevant because of changed circumstances in the peninsula or in America, and several deputies bitterly complained at the lack of urgency displayed by their colleagues. Others in both the Cádiz Cortes and those of the 1820s realized that strict observance of parliamentary prerogatives was unsuitable in the crisis facing the nation and they moved that the executive authority be permitted to devise and enact whatever policy it felt was required. The majority would not accept this diminution of their powers and would not permit any major policy decision to be taken without their prior approval. Nor was there much harmony over policy between the legislative and executive branches. At Cádiz, the Regency strongly supported trade concessions, if necessary accompanied by mediation by Britain, as the best hope of ending the revolutions, but both ideas, taken together or separately, were rejected by the Cortes. During the second constitutional era, there was frequent discord between the two branches of government with the cabinet generally preferring a more militant approach than that wanted by the Cortes. Both sides accused each other of acting unconstitutionally and deputies' pleas for up-to-date information on recent developments were often met with unexplained silence or delay by the ministers concerned.¹²

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Given the novelty of constitutional government in Spain, especially in the insecure and hostile environment in which it was obliged to operate, it is not surprising that the formulation of policy towards America was difficult. By the same token, it might be expected that under the absolute monarchy, with Ferdinand enjoying unrestricted, supreme power, efficiency or at least speed of decision would be the norm. In 1814, Ferdinand restored the institutional structure which had been in operation before his departure to exile in France in 1808, that is, the consultative pyramid of ministers, councils and committees whose function was to inform and advise the king on all affairs of state. Ferdinand, as an absolute ruler, certainly had the final say in whatever action was taken, but he did not reach his decisions alone. On the contrary, at least in respect of America, he used his consultative machinery to the fullest extent and he created influential new agencies to assist him. But again, disagreement was more prevalent among his advisers than consensus and even on those few occasions when the great weight of opinion was strongly in favour of a particular policy, he at times refused to follow it. Nevertheless, he did spend countless hours presiding over his Councils, listening to infinite expositions and personally interviewing all manner of people with ideas on how to restore his empire. He himself was consistent, never wavering in what he considered his sacred duty to preserve the territorial integrity of his kingdom.

Just as the parliamentary procedure and executive–legislative rivalries prejudiced the formulation of policy under the constitutionalist system, Ferdinand's consultative structure hindered rather than facilitated prompt decision and action. The main problem was the multiplicity and duplication of the administrative system which contained at each level several parallel layers. His ministers were his most immediate official advisers, but their individual responsibilities for American affairs were often ill-defined. This provoked frequent acrimony and rivalry between them which in turn caused some to argue that there should be a separate Ministry with sole jurisdiction over all areas of colonial business. The constitutionalists had reached a similar conclusion and created in 1812 the *Despacho de la Gobernación del reino para Ultramar*, or Ministry of Ultramar as it became known. This was abolished by Ferdinand in 1814, but he then continued and strengthened the experiment by centralizing all colonial affairs in a new ministry entitled the *Ministerio Universal de las Indias*. The official propaganda asserted that this would ensure