

Period of Imperial Crisis

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spain ruled as one of the strongest European and imperial powers. The balance of power began to shift in the eighteenth century, and the Spanish became increasingly weakened from that point onward. From 1792-1815, France experienced revolution and the rise of Napoleon. During these episodes, Spain was primarily an ally of the French. This partnership proved to be very costly for the Spanish, which lost territory and went into extreme debt that was very difficult to pay for as a result of their alliance with France.

In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the Spanish monarchy experienced an imperial and constitutional crisis, which eventually led to independence movements in nearly all Spanish American colonies. The period of Imperial Crisis, which lasted from roughly 1808-1814, altered the structure of Spain and its empire. In studying this period, it is not enough to analyze internal issues facing the Spanish crown to understand the Imperial Crisis. The Crisis was part of the larger climate in Europe that was in the midst of fighting the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). Spain's Imperial Crisis was triggered by external events largely construed by Napoleon himself. The Crisis sparked the Peninsular War (1808-1814) between the Iberian Peninsula (along with its British allies) and the French Empire. The chaos that emerged during the Imperial Crisis was one of the major factors behind the Spanish American Wars of Independence.

The Imperial Crisis (1808-1814)

In 1807, several years into the Napoleonic Wars, Spain signed a treaty with Napoleon, referred to as the Treaty of Fontainebleau. This treaty allied Spain with France against its Iberian neighbor Portugal. The Spanish Prime Minister Manuel de Godoy, a favorite of Spain's King Charles IV, was the mastermind behind this alliance with Napoleon. The Treaty of Fontainebleau ensured Spanish assistance to the French. In the same year as the treaty was signed, Napoleon invaded Portugal. Although Godoy stood to gain immensely from a French victory, his reputation as well as the alliance was widely unpopular throughout Spain. A major adversary of Godoy's was King Charles IV's son and heir to the throne, the future King Ferdinand VII. Supporters of Ferdinand spread rumors that Godoy was responsible for selling out Spain to Napoleon, who would prove to be unfaithful to Spain as an ally.

Napoleon failed to keep his word and the agreement that was struck at Fontainebleau. In December 1807, French forces invaded Spain. Over the next several months, the resistance against the French in Spain escalated. In March 1808, King Charles IV and Godoy fled the palace in Madrid (the Escorial) for fear of their lives. On March 18, 1808, a popular uprising—referred to as the Mutiny of Aranjuez—broke out. To stop the violence, King Charles IV abdicated the throne to his son Ferdinand. King Ferdinand VII continued to seek Napoleon's support, and as a result, he was forced to abdicate the throne in favor of Napoleon in May 1808. Napoleon placed his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish throne, which created a constitutional crisis in Spain as there was wide dispute over whom to consider the legitimate ruler.

The Spanish elite along with high-ranking members of the Spanish government accepted and recognized Joseph as the King of Spain. However, the common people of Spain refused to accept this, leading to revolts throughout the country. These revolts signaled the beginning of the Peninsular War, which would last for another six years until 1814. Local juntas formed all over Spain as the people tried to repel the French imperial army. British troops, who also saw it in their best interest to fight Napoleon and his troops, joined Spain. After the Battle of Bailen in 1808 demonstrated that the Spanish were capable of resisting the French, the central government in Spain reversed its previous loyalties and declared Joseph's position as monarch null and void. In August 1808, Spain proclaimed Ferdinand VII as king and established the Supreme Central Junta.

The Imperial Crisis also created tumult between Spain and its Spanish American colonies. While most colonies resisted French rule and created similar juntas to the ones established in Spain, many of the colonial juntas did not want to lose their power of self-government and risked losing equal representation with Spaniards. Many refused to join the Supreme Central Junta. In 1810, the Supreme Central Junta was replaced by the Cortes, or Spanish Parliament, which took place in the safe haven of Cadiz.

The Cadiz Cortés

In September 1810, the Cortes began to meet in Cadiz. The Cortes proved to be a disproportionately liberal and radical group compared to the rest of the country. Among other things, the Cortes called for equal treatment for the Americans, the creation of a free press, and the abolishment of the Inquisition. The liberals supported the reform philosophy of King Charles III of Spain in addition to several of the principles of the French Revolution. These included equality before the law, tax reform, and a centralized government.

The Council of Regency, which represented the more conservative representatives from the Supreme Central Junta, and other groups continued to claim authority. The conservatives viewed the Cortes as an interim government with the purpose of presiding over matters of state until King Ferdinand VII could regain the Spanish throne. The conservatives did not believe that the Cortes had the power to legislate in the absence of the monarch. Meanwhile, the liberals enjoyed a majority in the Cortes, and as a result, they established a constitutional convention out of what originated as an interim government.

The Spanish Constitution of 1812

A constitutional committee met in December and after several proposals back and forth, the Spanish Constitution was finally published in March 1812. The Spanish Constitution of 1812 was the most famous product to come from the Cortes and was one of the most liberal constitutions of its time. It was signed by 134 members from the peninsula along with 51 members from the Americas and the Philippines. The Spanish Constitution of 1812 established the Cortes as the unicameral legislative body and

endowed it with broad and sweeping authority. It essentially created a constitutional monarchy that endowed the country with national sovereignty. Although the Spanish Constitution of 1812 provided substantial power to the Cortes, the king retained veto power along with other privileges.

The Spanish Constitution of 1812 provided for a limited monarchy that was governed through the king's ministers, who were ultimately subject to parliamentary control. The constitution created universal male suffrage, largely by removing the property requirement previously necessary in order to vote. The Spanish Constitution of 1812 also enabled a more open and free economy through the repeal of traditional property law and tax reforms.

The Bourbon Restoration

In December 1813, following several military setbacks, Napoleon finally acknowledged Ferdinand VII as the legitimate King of Spain. He signed the Treaty of Valencay, which stated that the king was allowed to return to Spain. In the spring of 1814, following Napoleon's defeat, King Ferdinand VII was finally restored to the throne. Immediately following King Ferdinand's restoration, the majority of the Spanish people were happy for his return. The public overwhelmingly blamed the liberal policies that came out of the French Revolution and blamed the Francophiles in Spain for causing the Peninsular War.

At first, King Ferdinand VII promised to uphold the liberal advancements reached during the Peninsular War, including the Spanish Constitution of 1812. However, not even six weeks following his return to Spain, King Ferdinand abolished the Spanish Constitution. The rollback of reforms and the reassertion of absolutist power played a major role in causing the Spanish American Wars of Independence over the course of the following decade.

In 1820, there was another revolt in Spain during which time the Spanish Constitution of 1812 was briefly reinstated under the Trienio Liberal—the liberal government that ruled for three years. In 1823 after Spain approached the conservative Concert of Europe, the French came to the aid of King Ferdinand VII and helped put down the rebellion. That year King Ferdinand VII restored his power to its full strength and continued to reign as an absolute monarch until his death ten years later.

Lesson Summary:

- During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, Spain experienced an Imperial Crisis. The Imperial Crisis emerged as a result of the abdication of the Spanish throne by King Charles IV and King Ferdinand VII in favor of Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte.
- During the Imperial Crisis several juntas (local administrative governing bodies) were established throughout Spain and Spanish America. In the absence of a legitimate Spanish King these juntas implemented the principle of self-government.
- After consolidating the provincial Spanish juntas into a Supreme Central Junta, there was a special assembling of the Cortes (Spanish Parliament) that gathered in Cádiz. The Cádiz Cortes was a predominantly liberal body and was seen then, and by historians today, as a major step towards liberalism and democracy in Spanish history.
- The Cádiz Cortes created the Spanish Constitution of 1812, which reflected the ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It was one of the most progressive and liberal documents of its time.
- The restoration of King Ferdinand VII to the throne in 1814 ushered in a conservative period for Spain. Ferdinand repealed several of the advancements that had been achieved during French occupation including the Spanish Constitution of 1812.
- The Imperial Crisis and the Peninsular War with France that followed played a major role in sparking the Spanish American Wars of Independence.