Charles III of Spain: the Enlightened King and Madrid’s ‘Best Mayor’

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We examine the story of one of Spain’s most innovative leaders, a man who – it was initially thought – would fulfil a secondary role in the Bourbon dynasty and in the history of Europe, but who, nevertheless, would secure a preeminent place in both: Charles III of Spain, the Enlightened King, who surrounded himself with knowledgeable advisors to push through reforms and develop innovations that still exist today.

Charles of Bourbon was the son of Philip V of Spain, the first King of the Bourbon dynasty following the conclusion of the War of Spanish Succession. By birth, he was destined to occupy a secondary role in European politics, being the third son of the king and the product of a second marriage.

After signing the Treaty of Utrecht, concluding the bloody Spanish civil war (world war, in fact), Spain had lost practically all of its influence in the Italian territories. However, Philip V had signed the Treaty of Seville with England and France, ensuring him sovereignty over the Duchy of Parma. Following the death of the Duke of Parma in 1731, his adversary in the War of Succession, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, invaded the Duchy, prompting Spain to threaten to wage war against the House of Austria. Ultimately, Charles VI resolved to negotiate and the Duchy of Parma fell to the young Charles of Bourbon, at the age of 15.

However, the machinations of Philip V in Italy did not end there. The children of his first marriage (Louis and Ferdinand) were destined to rule the Kingdom of Spain, while the children of his second marriage would reign over Italy.

In 1733, the King of Poland died and, again, Philip V (and France) took swift action to secure the throne. But Charles VI was unwilling to accept his intimate Bourbon enemies as neighbours port and starboard, and a war ensued. Subsequent peace treaties established that Philip V and his dynasty would abandon their Polish claims, while the Austrians would relinquish their Italian territories, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. And it was this kingdom that was ceded to the Duke of Parma, our protagonist, who at the age of 17, became King Charles VII of Naples and Sicily.

During his reign as king in Italy, the young Charles (born in Madrid’s Real Alcázar, the precursor of the Royal Palace, which burned to the ground on Christmas Eve 1734, a fire from which Velázquez’s Las Meninas was saved) displayed good governance skills. He dismantled the last vestiges of feudalism that gave the aristocracy jurisprudence over their lands, thus granting vassals access to court. In Naples, he erected buildings worthy of a capital city: palaces, theatres, hospices, and other public structures. He improved the region’s infrastructure by designing roads that became the precursors of many still in use today in southern Italy. He took an interest in historic heritage, being the first to sponsor excavations in the cities of Pompeii, Herculanenum, and Paestum, which revealed findings of great historic and artistic value. He established friendships with great Italian architects, like Sabatini who, at the time, was engaged in the design of the Royal Palace of Madrid, which Charles himself inaugurated in 1764.

Such was the fate of Charles VII of Naples. However, his life would take an unexpected turn. His half-brother, Louis, had ascended to the throne briefly in 1724 following the abdication of Philip V, but his reign would be the shortest in the history of the Spanish royal family and after 229, he passed away, returning the crown to his father. After the death of Philip V, Charles’ other half-brother, Ferdinand, ascended to the throne as Ferdinand VI, but he died childless in 1759, and Charles was proclaimed King of Spain.
Charles ceded the Crown of Naples and Sicily to his son Ferdinand, and travelled to Spain, where he found a country mired in war (as usual), specifically the Seven Years War with England (1756-1763). The British were expanding in America and had taken the French colony of Quebec and the Honduran coast, in addition to having occupied Manila and Havana. Charles III achieved an ephemeral peace by relinquishing Florida to England and receiving Louisiana from France, given the impossibility of defending it.

But the insult would soon be returned to England after Spain joined France in allying with the colonies in the American Revolution. In the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war, Spain recovered Minorca and Florida, but failed to secure Gibraltar.

In the field of domestic policy, Charles surrounded himself with enlightened statesmen, like Esquilache, Campomanes, Floridablanca, and the Duke of Aranda, to undertake major reforms in social structures, as well as infrastructures and facilities. Esquilache was appointed head of the Treasury and, among other things, he created the National Lottery (to finance the Seven Years War). He also reorganised and modernised the Armed Forces (his ordinances lasted until the 20th c.), limited the economic power of the Church, and liberalised the grain trade. The rise in food prices as a result of the latter measure, coupled with an ordinance banning the wearing of long capes and broad-brimmed hats by madrileños in favour of the French-style short capes and three-cornered hats triggered the Esquilache Riots, in 1766.

In the aftermath of the unrest, the King and one of his ministers, Campomanes, seized the opportunity to confiscate the possessions of the Jesuits, who were accused of instigating the plot, and expelled them from Spain. This expulsion prompted major educational reforms, both on a university level and in the creation of Art and Trade Schools, which remain in existence today as Vocational Institutes (Escuelas de Formación Profesional). These were installed in the buildings seized from the Jesuits, and the expropriated funds were used to subsidise hospices and hospitals.

During his reign, he also established the Banco de San Carlos (Bank of St. Charles), which became the Banco de San Fernando (Bank of St. Ferdinand), and merged with the Banco de Isabel II (Bank of Isabel II, which served as the central bank for loyalists of Isabel in another of the umpteen civil wars) to create the Bank of Spain in 1856.

In terms of infrastructure and buildings, he gave Madrid many of its most iconic monuments: Cibeles and Neptune Squares, the Prado Museum, the Botanical Gardens, the Hospital San Carlos (today the Reina Sofía Museum), and the Puerta de Alcalá were all erected according to his instructions. In addition, he was responsible for implementing sewage, lighting, and rubbish-collection systems, paving large swaths of the city, and designing a new urban expansion.

He developed plans to repopulate certain inland areas of Andalusia, resulting in towns like La Carolina and La Carlota. He designed programmes to promote industrial development, the postal service, infrastructures like the Canal Imperial de Aragón (Imperial canal of Aragon), and the current highway system, which was designed to serve as the backbone of the territory and increase the competitiveness of non-coastal regions.

Charles III died in 1788, bequeathing the throne to his son, Charles IV. The French Revolution that erupted immediately thereafter led to a turbulent period, as well as a blockade in reaction to the horror of what had occurred in France. The reform agenda of Charles III quickly fell into oblivion and subsequent monarchs were much more focused on a French invasion, revolutions, counter-revolutions, and the process of independence in the American colonies. However, the vestiges of Enlightened Despotism and the King’s long-term plans for economic and social reform endure to this day.